

Clean Regency Romance

A Regency Celebration

15
Books

Charity McColl

Finding Love on Drury Lane

The Ugliest Man in London

For The Love of A Lord

Taming the Lady

To Delight a Duke

The Forgotten Bride for the New Duke

Twin Trouble

Falling For The Resolute Duke

Obsession on Love

The Duke's Secret

Heaven's Hand

The Duke's Mistress

The Duke's Duke

A Regency Celebration - Regency Romance Boxset

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Finding Love on Drury Lane

Another Scandal for Lord Bennington

Lord St. John was accustomed to receiving daily communications from his family whenever he was in London; it was one of the reasons why he preferred to stay in the country. Unfortunately, his father, Lord Bennington, was in the habit of traveling with an entourage of rumor and scandal no matter where he went. If Lord Bennington traveled to Italy, one could be sure that there would be an opera singer who would enjoy his company for late-night suppers. If he went to Brighton, he would invariably spend time with the Prince Regent, which naturally meant baccarat and gambling debts which of course had to be honored. If he went to London, which he did every Season, there was a banquet of opportunity for vice and indulgence.

Which was why St. John Bennington was in London a full week earlier than he had originally intended to be, and why he was in the office of Niles Carstairs, the family solicitor whose life had become much more orderly since Lord Bennington's son had achieved his majority seven years ago and had taken over the delicate task of managing his father.

"Yes, Carstairs, the same allowance as before," St. John said. "He'll run through it in no time, I know, but it's the amount that I've allocated for his London expenses."

"Yes, sir," Mr. Carstairs said. He did not voice his thoughts that it was very fortunate that the previous Lord Bennington, St. John's grandfather, had written his will in very precise terms so that it reined in his son's extravagances and directed his grandson to manage the family's wealth and estates.

"It does not matter how much money my father has," St. John said matter-of-factly. "He will spend it all."

“Yes, sir. My lord, what will you do when that happens?”

“Send him home to the country, certainly,” St. John said promptly. “When the purse is empty, my father’s love of London wanes.”

“Yes . . . “ Mr. Carstairs agreed, but his hesitation alerted St. John that his solicitor was not entirely convinced.

“Out with it, Carstairs,” St. John ordered, but with the winning smile that reminded Mr. Carstairs of his mother, the lovely, gentle Lady Bennington, that great beauty who had, alas, left this world far too soon. Her son was the very image of her, but of a more serious demeanor than his cheerful mother. Like her, St. John had brown hair which reminded one of bronze, and dark brown eyes that, in Lady Bennington, had brought to mind a cup of rich cocoa. He had her generous mouth and her innate grace. But St. John Bennington seemed to have very little reason to smile most of the time, so when he did smile, it brought his mother to mind so completely. Mr. Carstairs had nurtured a warm feeling—one could not say a *tendre*, of course, for the spouse of one of his clients—for Lady Bennington throughout her life and even now that he was a long-time bachelor, he still regarded her as the most charming woman of his acquaintance. It was a shame that young Lady Elizabeth, whose birth had been the cause of her mother’s death, should be such a shy, retiring girl that she possessed none of the late Lady Bennington’s allure.

“It’s simply that . . . you have not been in London long enough to hear, I daresay, but . . . “

“What’s he up to now, Carstairs?” St. John inquired with resignation. “Been challenged to a duel because he had an assignation with another man’s wife? By God, I hope not; I should have to second him, I suppose, and Father is simply not capable of rising at dawn to attend to an affair of honor. Has he lost at cards again? Has he been to Tattersall’s?”

“No . . . that is, I couldn’t say. I have not heard.”

“Come now, Carstairs, I know that you hear everything that happens in London before the gossips do,” St. John said.

Mr. Carstairs pursed his lips primly. He did not care for the

comparison to gossips. That he had numerous sources of information was true, but in his business, it was wise to be au courant with the goings on of the ton. Many of its members were his clients and Mr. Carstairs did not like to be surprised by bad news. It was much more effective to know the bad news in advance so that, when his client came for help, he had had time to consider what options were available to provide solutions.

"I have heard, my lord, that Lord Bennington has been quite regular in attendance at the Theatre Royal."

That was not unusual. His father was an inveterate playgoer, preferring the comedies to the tragedies; during the latter, he spent more time with his quizzing glass, looking out over the audience to spy an acquaintance rather than paying attention to what was happening on stage. Unless, of course, the leading lady was particularly attractive, with the statuesque anatomy and inviting air that Lord Bennington preferred in his cheres amies.

"And?" St. John prompted. There had to be more to this than a fondness for Mrs. Maria Kemble's performances.

"It is rumored . . . "

St. John restrained his impatience. Carstairs was incapable of simply stating the matter. He was fastidious by nature and this resulted in a prolonged period of suspense over a subject which St. John would have preferred to be made immediately aware.

"I suppose he has bought a pearl necklace for an actress," St. John said in an effort to spur Carstairs forward. "That's his usual gift for his latest inamorata."

"I am very much afraid that the pearl necklace has already happened, my lord. The rumor is that his most recent gift . . . it pains me to say it—"

"It pains me to wait for you to say it, Carstairs," St. John said, his patience sorely tried.

"It is said that he is very often in the company of Marguerite Winslow."

"Marguerite Winslow? She must be half his age."

"Twenty-two years younger, I believe, if my arithmetic and her age are true."

"She's not the first Bird of Paradise to catch his eye," St. John said philosophically. "I suppose it was inevitable that he should begin to seek someone so much younger. He'll move on to someone else in time. I only hope the next one isn't a debutante."

"I am not sure that he will be moving on, my lord. I have heard that Miss Winslow was seen wearing the Bennington sapphire on her left hand."

For a moment, Carstairs was fearful that being the messenger meant that he was in danger of getting shot, because Lord St. John's dark eyes suddenly grew even darker as if they were overtaken by a black cloud. His features tightened until they no longer recalled dear Lady Bennington's countenance in the least. In fact, Carstairs thought, they resembled the look of a man who could be dangerous.

"Are you telling me, Carstairs, that my father gave my mother's ring to this—this—actress?"

"That is what I have heard, my lord," Carstairs said.

"From whom? Who the devil told you this?"

Carstairs was alarmed. Lord St. John was a serious young man, always composed, his manners reserved and perfect, his deportment flawlessly that of a gentleman. Just now, he looked ready to pounce, his hands gripping the arms of the chair as if he had to force himself to remain seated.

"I . . . people tell me things, my lord," Mr. Carstairs said weakly.

"What else have people been telling you?"

"I think that perhaps it would be as well if you were to go to Lord Bennington and ask him yourself," Carstairs said, recovering himself and quite eager now for his client to leave. Carstairs doubted that it was advisable for his constitution to be subjected to the sort of volatile episode that further disclosure might incite.

"What else," St. John inquired, his teeth clenched, "have people been telling you about my father and this woman?"

“One hears things, my lord, but that does not mean that one necessarily credits them, you understand,” Carstairs hedged. “One assembles the information that people provide, but it would be very rash to simply believe it without further investigation. My intention was not to alarm you, but rather to acquaint you with what people are saying.”

“Carstairs, it is apparent that you communicate with a great many more people than do I. I have only just arrived in London; I have not yet been to any of my clubs, nor have I been to my house. If people are saying anything at all, and if any of those subjects of discussion relate to my mother’s ring, I wish to know about it before I am broadsided. Am I clear?”

“Yes, yes, of course, my lord, but . . . “

The man looked terrified. St. John forced himself to sit back in his chair. He crossed his legs and relinquished his iron grip on the arms of the chair. He smiled.

“My apologies, Carstairs, I did not mean to be so churlish. I should not be sentimental about my mother’s jewelry, after all. I had assumed that my father would save it for Elizabeth, that is all. It is on her behalf that I have reacted. Now then, I pray you, what have you heard?”

Carstairs was somewhat mollified by his lordship’s return to decorum, but he was not convinced that St. John Bennington would remain thus.

“I am due for an appointment in half an hour, my lord, and I cannot linger. However, I will tell you that I have heard that the relationship is quite. . . er. . . quite . . .”

“Carstairs,” St. John began in a tone of warning.

“I have heard that they are wedded. Now, my lord, I really must bid you adieu, so that I will not be late for my appointment. I shall be glad to meet with you at another time, but you understand, I cannot be late---my lord? My lord?”

St. John Bennington had risen from his chair. He took up his hat, his coat, and his walking stick and left the office without a backward glance.

Carstairs hurriedly got up and, rushing to the door, locked it. He did not intend to be available once Lord St. John found out on his own the news that had London collectively raising its eyebrows.

Lady Elizabeth's Companion

Lord St. John decided to walk to his father's London house rather than hiring a hackney to take him there. It was not fashionable to walk the distance, which was not close to Mr. Carstairs' place of business, but St. John was accustomed to traveling by foot in the country. It was, in fact, his preference. Today, however, he realized that he needed to walk in order to expel the ire which he felt at Mr. Carstairs' disclosure. His mother's ring on the hand of an actress! An actress replacing his dead mother as Lady Bennington! A household which had been bereft of its mistress for the past seventeen years, now to be ruled by an actress? An actress! Even for his father, it was intolerable.

Lord St. John walked with a purposeful gait which took no notice of others in his path as he moved forward, oblivious to the startled expressions and even glares which came his way as he advanced. He was dressed, others noticed, in the height of fashion. Clearly he was a man of some stature. But he could not be a member of the beau monde, because no gentlemen of breeding would ever be so uncouth as to hurry. Gentlemen moved at a leisurely pace, indolently making their way to their destination. Therefore, although he was quite handsome, and carried himself as if he were of note, he must not be, the people decided and dismissed him from their thoughts.

Lord St. John, having arrived at his father's Belgrave house, moved swiftly up the stairs and, taking out his key, unlocked the door.

"My lord!" Billings, the butler, revealed his surprise when St. John entered. "I did not expect you."

"No? You should have, Billings. Why is it that I must learn that my father has married an actress not from my father himself, or from my sister, or from my aunt, but from the solicitor?" Lord St. John demanded. "Have I not specifically told you to inform me of any

occasion which may require my attention? Was I unclear in my instructions?"

"No, sir," Billings said as he took his lordship's hat and coat. "But, you see, Lord Bennington wanted to tell you himself."

"Did he? Did he indeed? Did he think that I shall be rejoicing at the news that my father has married an actress and that he has bestowed upon her my mother's ring?"

"I cannot say what his lordship's thoughts are, my lord," Billings replied. "I only know that he is eager to see you and tell you himself. I myself posted his letter to you. It must be on its way now."

"It's just as well that I am here now to learn of it. I should not care to receive a letter with such news."

"I believe Lord Bennington was more circumspect than that, my lord. His letter merely asked you to come to London sooner than you originally planned to do."

"Is that so? Now that I am in London, he may tell me the news himself," Lord St. John said in a belligerent tone of voice. "Where is he, that I may extend my felicitations upon his nuptial joy?"

"I believe—that is, he generally accompanies Lady Bennington to the theatre so that she may make herself ready, and after that, he proceeds to his club until he returns to the theatre to watch her performance."

"I see. And what of Lady Elizabeth?"

"She is out shopping with Miss Dorchester, my lord."

"And who, pray tell, is Miss Dorchester?"

"She is the protégé of Lady Bennington."

"Protégé? You mean she is an actress? My sister is out in public with an actress? Has my father entirely lost his mind?"

"Yes, sir, I mean, yes, she is an actress and Lady Elizabeth is out with her, but I did not mean yes that Lord Bennington has lost his mind. That was not my meaning, my lord."

“Where has this—protégé—taken my sister?”

“She—they—Lady Elizabeth mentioned that she planned to go shopping. Lady Bennington has told her that, as she will be coming out this season, she must have a new wardrobe.”

“A new wardrobe?” St. John did not begrudge his sister new attire; she seemed to be entirely uninterested in fashion and seldom requested anything. In fact, he was the one who had to urge her to go to Worth’s so that she would be suitably dressed.

“Yes, my lord. Lady Bennington said that Lady Elizabeth is far too pretty to be dressed so dowdily.”

“Did she, indeed?”

“Yes, sir,” Billings said. “Lady Bennington has taken quite an interest in Lady Elizabeth.”

“What are you saying, Billings? Is my father’s actress wife plotting to marry my sister off to some debauched member of her profession?”

Billings did not disguise his shocked expression. “I should not think so, my lord. The affection seems to be genuine, and it is returned. I believe that Lady Elizabeth enjoys having another female in the house.”

Was this a subtle means of criticism from the dispassionate butler, chiding St. John for his bachelor status? Was it an indictment of the fact that he spent so much of the year in the country, leaving his sister to her own company while in London? One could never be sure with Billings. His features revealed nothing of his thoughts.

“They are shopping. So I should expect to find them easily.”

“Yes, my lord. But Miss Dorchester is a young woman of great comportment.”

“Is she not an actress?” St. John demanded.

“Yes, my lord, but—“

“She is, no doubt, well able to feign this comportment of which you speak. It is nothing more to her than a performance, I should think,

and apparently, a convincing one, for it has fooled you.”

Despite his status as the butler, Billings was confident of his position. “I do not think, my lord, that I am so easily fooled,” he returned stiffly.

It was no use berating Billings when his true displeasure was directed at his father. “My apologies, Billings. My sister is young and sheltered and I do not wish her to be manipulated by someone whose profession marks her as a woman who must inevitably be much more worldly than Lady Elizabeth.”

“Yes, sir,” Billings said.

St. John sighed. He was not forgiven; Billings’ tone told him as much. But the butler’s words had struck him in a vulnerable spot. He ought to pay more attention to Elizabeth, he knew. She was shy and not at all at ease in society; she was, furthermore, terrified at the thought of making her debut. St. John knew that he ought to have been more vigilant, making sure that she made the rounds of society so that she would be familiar with them when she was invited to the engagements which made the London Season so busy.

“I am going to seek my sister,” he said. “Please inform my father that I shall see him tonight.”

“Will you be dining here, my lord? When Her Ladyship is performing, they dine at three o’clock.”

“Three o’clock? Who the devil dines at such an hour?” St. John exclaimed.

“I believe thespians, my lord. They go to the theatre to prepare for the performance and many of them, as I understand, do not care to be overfull from meals when they are on stage.”

“I see. So if I wish to see my father, I must bring myself and an appetite back here at three o’clock?”

“He goes to his club after the carriage lets Lady Bennington off at the theatre,” Billings said. “You would be able to meet him there.”

“So I shall,” St. John said with a grim resolve that did not bode well for Lord Bennington.

A walk would allow him more opportunity to invigorate his thoughts, but St. John realized that now was the time when he needed to contemplate what he had learned. So he called upon a hackney cab to take him into the shopping district of London where, according to Billings, he would find his sister and this—this protégé of the actress who was now, according to Carstairs, not only Lady Bennington, but also Elizabeth's stepmother. And his, St. John realized with a forbidding twist of his lips that exposed his own opinion of having a stepmother who was not much older than he.

Elizabeth was at the mercy of a calculating actress who, having seduced his father into marriage, was now campaigning to outfit his sister so that she would attract some dissolute man to offer for her. No doubt an actor, or some other member of that ignoble profession, who would welcome marriage to an heiress. Elizabeth, uninitiated into the strategies of the ton, would not realize that she was a pawn in the hands of practiced tacticians who viewed her as a lucrative source of funds for their dissolute ways. His father was a fool! But he had always been a fond father. What could have allowed him to so forget his duty that he would permit his daughter to be left to the devices of an actress and her protégé who, between the two of them, no doubt had the direst of plans for a young innocent girl?

Billings, although he had not uttered a word of reproof, had made his thoughts plain and he was right, St. John knew. He had been a negligent brother, preferring his time spent at the family estate in the country, where he occupied his days with attending to the lands, the tenants and their concerns, speaking with the steward, the stablemaster, the housekeeper on matters concerning Bennington Hall. He fished in the pond in the spring, he took part in the hunt in the fall, and he lived his life according to the seasons of the land. There was the planting and the harvest to occupy his efforts. He was as attentive to the responsibilities of Bennington Hall as his father was dismissive.

Which left Elizabeth in London with her father, who spent his evenings occupied with a gentleman's pursuits; parties and routs and gambling, followed by late-night entertainments of which a young girl ought not to be aware. Doubtless Elizabeth was oblivious to the reasons why her father so often came home late and, once

abed, did not rise until noon. Perhaps there were days when Elizabeth and Lord Bennington barely crossed paths inside the London house, St. John realized. And now, here was this actress who had suddenly taken an interest in Elizabeth. An innocent would not perceive the motive for such interest, but a gentleman of the world would know very well what was about. Marguerite Winslow and her protégé might have hoodwinked his father, but they would not do the same with him.

A Family Encounter

Being in the bustle of London streets again after the tranquility of the country did not appease St. John's mood. The streets were dirty in comparison to the fresh air and fertile soil of the country; the men and women strolling past were loud, their laughter raucous, their presence stifling, nothing like the open spaces and verdant green landscape that he preferred.

But he was not here to amuse himself, he reminded as he approached the shops frequented by ladies of the ton. He was here to rescue his sister from the clutches of a malevolent actress and her protégé.

He found Elizabeth in a dress shop. He spied his sister through the window and immediately strode inside.

"St. John!" Elizabeth cried happily, putting down the fabric she had been holding up to her shoulders and racing to his side.

He hugged her warmly, enveloping her in his embrace. Over his shoulder he met the eyes of a goddess. She was tall and slender, dressed in a simple pelisse and an unremarkable bonnet, but clothing was irrelevant; had anyone noticed what Helen of Troy was wearing? Ringlets escaping from the brim of her bonnet were a lucent shade of yellow that seemed to have been cast from gold and rays of the sun. The lustrous curls framed an arresting face with large, long-lashed brown eyes, a dainty nose, and lips that were the color of rose petals, against a complexion that was neither ivory nor tan, but a warm shade in between, as if her hair had been the deciding factor in what her skin tones would be.

The vision met his gaze with a clear-eyed expression that showed neither surprise nor alarm.

"You must introduce me to your companion, Elizabeth," St. John said.

"Oh, yes, St. John, this is Nell Dorchester, my friend. Nell, this is my brother, St. John Bennington. But how did you arrive so soon? Papa only sent the letter this week, urging you to come to London sooner than you planned."

"It seems," St. John said, "that I must have known there was reason to come sooner."

He looked away from the goddess. Like a siren, she took hold of his thoughts and this was no time to be enchanted.

"I'm so glad you are here. Papa will be so happy. Now that you are here, you can tell me what you think."

"What I think about what?" he asked, startled that she would solicit his views on the marriage while the protégé was with her.

"This fabric," Elizabeth said. "I am quite partial to the yellow, but Nell thinks the blue suits me better. What do you think?"

He was inclined to disagree with the protégé on principle, despite her allure, but he considered the matter. Elizabeth had their father's blue eyes and brown hair and he had to agree that the blue muslin seemed to enhance her coloring more than the yellow silk.

"I should not presume," he evaded, "you must choose for yourself."

"Then I shall choose the yellow," Elizabeth declared.

Was this the same biddable sister who always sought his counsel and obeyed his wishes without demur and would not decide until he had weighed in with his views?

"On second thought," he said, "I like the blue."

Elizabeth smiled in triumph. He did not recall ever seeing such an expression on her face. She looked as if she were quite willing to challenge his judgment. What was the protégé teaching her?

"You can wear it with the Bennington sapphires," he said, carefully watching to see how the protégé reacted.

Her countenance did not change, but Elizabeth's was animated. "I am sure that Marguerite will let me do so," she said. "You are exactly right, St. John. The sapphires will be perfect with this

frock.”

“Marguerite?” St. John inquired blandly. “Who is she, and why should she care whether or not you wear our mother’s sapphires?”

Elizabeth faltered. “Oh,” she said. “You don’t know.”

“Lady Elizabeth,” the protégé said, “would you like me to finish your business here while you and your brother return home?”

“But what about you, Nell?”

The protégé smiled and once again, she was a goddess, the full lips curving like an exotic flower. “I shall take a hackney and return soon. I have other business to conduct.”

“But you will be alone,” Elizabeth protested.

Although she did not look his way, the protégé’s smile widened as if she were anticipating his thoughts. “I shall be perfectly all right,” she replied. “I can take care of myself.”

In the hackney with her brother, Elizabeth fretted. “Nell should not be without a chaperone,” she said.

“Are you her chaperone?”

“Of course not, silly, but we are together and so it is all right. But on her own is a very different matter. We ought to have brought her with us.”

“I am sure that Miss Dorchester can, as she said, fend for herself. We have matters to discuss. Father is married?”

“Yes—but he wants to tell you himself,” Elizabeth said, as forlorn as a child who has unwittingly given away a secret.”

“Why don’t you tell me first? I promise to act as if I am surprised.”

“You won’t be angry?” his sister asked urgently, turning to face him so that she could read his expression.

“I don’t know. You have not told me anything yet. Father is married. To whom? A respectable woman widowed by the war? A worthy matron with grown children who occupies herself with good deeds of charity? I believe that Lady Melsing has been widowed for

several years. Has Father taken her to wife?"

"No . . . oh, St. John, you mustn't be angry," Elizabeth begged "He has married Marguerite Winslow. She is very pretty and very amiable and I like her very much."

"Marguerite Winslow!" he said, reacting as if he were hearing the news for the first time. "Surely not the actress!"

"Yes, but she's not at all what you would expect."

"I would not expect our father to marry an actress!" St. John retorted. "I would expect him to show a modicum of decorum, if not for himself, then for you. You are about to come out this Season. Does he want you to be exposed to the malicious tongues of the ton? She will not be invited to the homes of the best families. How will that affect you?"

"Now that you are here, you shall escort me," Elizabeth said warmly, not denying his prediction.

"So I shall," he agreed, "but first, you must tell me what is going on. I assume that the actress is living with you and Father? Who is this Miss Dorchester?"

"She is the most splendid person, St. John, truly she is. She has traveled all over the world and she is so interesting to talk to. She is —"

"A well-traveled itinerary is, to be sure, an admirable trait, but it does not betoken a woman who can be received in the homes where you will be entertained. Who is she?"

"She is . . . she is an orphan," Elizabeth said quickly.

"Who were her parents?"

"I don't know. She has never said and I should not be so rude as to inquire."

"Father should have inquired for you. She had parents at some time, I should think, had she not? Were they respectable?"

"I don't know, St. John, and what does it matter? Nell is my friend!" Elizabeth declared. There was a defiant intonation in her voice that

he did not care for. It was, no doubt, one of the results of her association with that enticing but unsuitable protégé of Marguerite Winslow.

"It matters a great deal. You will make your debut in London society this Season. You are a Bennington. You may entertain the prospect of an advantageous marriage with your heritage. You would not like to see your prospects ruined because Father has, once again, gotten himself into a scrape."

"Papa is very happy with Marguerite. She amuses him. She is very entertaining."

"I daresay other men have found her so before. But they were not foolish enough to marry her."

"St. John! That is a beastly thing to say!" his sister, who heretofore had regarded him as an oracle, upbraided him sternly as if he were still in the schoolroom. "You have not met her; you cannot judge her simply because she is an actress."

There was a nugget of truth in his sister's words. Although he knew very well what kind of women became actresses, and what sort of men kept company with them, he could not, in fairness, assess her without meeting her first. He knew, without meeting her, what he would find, but it was no use explaining this to Elizabeth. It was best to keep his verdict to himself until he had had time to investigate the matter thoroughly. After that, he would decide what to do. Perhaps Father could be bribed to return to the country for the duration of the Season so that Elizabeth could make her debut without the glare of scandal overshadowing her appearance in society. As for the actress, that would take some additional consideration. Now that she was the wife of a titled aristocrat, she would not be easily dismissed.

The protégé . . . that was another matter entirely. If he were going to spend the entire Season in London, shepherding Elizabeth to engagements, he would benefit from a private arrangement with such a delectable creature. He could rent a small house for her on the outskirts of London where he could visit discreetly. How he conducted himself in private was his own business; he, unlike his father, was able to maintain a private life which was not the talk of

the ton. The protégé would, no doubt, appreciate the advantages of a concealed arrangement which provided for her in the accustomed manner. Other women of her class did, and why should she be any different?

The Happy Bridegroom

By the time St. John located his father in what had formerly been his least favorite club—Lord Bennington belonged to many and his son had naturally gone to his favorite haunts, one by one, only to be told that His Lordship was not present—he was out of sorts and ill-tempered. Traveling about London in search of his wayward father was not an enterprise likely to nurture a good humor. So when he was admitted to the final club where his father could be, and informed that His Lordship was present, St. John felt only irritation.

His father was restfully ensconced in a chair that could only be described as comfortable, for it had no esthetic advantages that St. John could perceive. He was reading a newspaper and sipping from a goblet which, St. John was surprised to see, was nearly full. Perhaps he had not been at the club long enough to drain the glass with his usual alacrity.

“Father,” St. John said, standing in front of his father’s chair.

Lord Bennington looked up. Immediately, an expression of delight suffused his handsome countenance. “My boy!” he exclaimed, putting down the newspaper and rising to his feet. “How delightful to see you. The mail coaches must be running at extraordinary speed; I only just sent my letter, urging you to come to London earlier, and here you are.”

“I missed your letter,” St. John said.

“Oh, well, I’m sure the mail is running well anyway. No matter,” his father said, signaling for the servant. “Brandy? Wine?”

“Yes,” St. John said.

Lord Bennington showed confusion. “Which is it to be?”

“Wine, if you please,” St. John directed the servant.

"My boy, I am delighted to see you. Absolutely delighted. I cannot wait for you to meet Marguerite."

"Marguerite."

"Yes." An expression of what St. John could only regard as boyish shyness came over his father's face. "I confess it. I have fallen in love. I did not think I could ever meet a woman who charmed me as your mother did—and of course, no one will ever take her place—but Marguerite . . . " he paused, considering, St. John supposed, the rapturous charms of the actress whose name his father repeated as if it were a sacred incantation. "She is a most astounding woman, Marguerite Winslow."

"She is an actress, is she not?" St. John inquired flatly.

"Yes, she is, and most gifted. Have you seen her perform?"

"I have not had that pleasure."

"That's because you spend so much time in the country, my boy. You must come to London more often so that you can partake of the city's marvels. I know! We shall go to the theatre together tonight and you can see for yourself what I mean. She is . . . Sinjin, words cannot do adequate justice to her beauty, her presence, her enchanting ways, her voice . . . "

"You sound like a boy who has just fallen under the spell of his first love."

Instead of being insulted, Lord Bennington chuckled. "I daresay I do. I feel that way at times. She is . . . how can I describe her?"

"No need," St. John said curtly. "I am sure that I shall be inspired to come up with my own adjectives when I meet her."

His father was impervious to the ironic tone. "Oh, yes, no doubt. Prepare to be captivated."

"I am not sure that I wish to be captivated by the woman who is now my stepmother," St. John replied.

His father brushed that thought away. "Of course there is no consideration that she will be anything of the sort to you," he said. "You are much too close in age. She has not told me her age,

naturally; women never disclose that sort of information. But you are eight-and-twenty and I cannot think her more than five years your senior.”

“How very charming,” St. John observed.

“Yes, she is. I confess that when I first met her, I did not have marriage in my thoughts. We are men of the world, my boy, and you will not be shocked to learn that I did not regard myself, since the loss of your dear mamma, as a man who would wish to acquire a wife. But Marguerite is a virtuous woman and she was not flattered by my suggestion that she and I might enjoy one another’s intimate company without, as they say, benefit of clergy.”

“What a surprise.”

Once again, Lord Bennington failed to detect the sarcasm in his son’s voice.

“Yes, I agree. One hears that actresses . . . and I own that my prior experience led me to be sure that she would accommodate my offer. She did not. In fact,” Lord Bennington beamed at the memory, “she slapped my face.”

“How very astute of her.”

“Astute? Oh, you mean because she felt that, as a gentleman, I should treat her as a lady.”

“That was not precisely what I meant,” his son corrected him, “but pray, go on. I am enraptured by the tale of your romance.”

“It is a tale worth telling,” Lord Bennington agreed. “As you know, I have lived what some would call the life of a reprobate since the death of your mother. I make no apologies for it; I was a widower and I confess it, I am not a man to be solitary. I have always been fond of the theatre, as you know.”

His father was fond of actresses, that much St. John could confirm. He merely gave a noncommittal nod.

Lord Bennington was more than ready to continue the saga. Marguerite, it seemed, was a paragon of beauty, a testament to virtue, a monument to her art. When she was on stage, it was as if there was no one else; she took command of every role she played.

Of course, he was enthralled by her performances and in a matter of time, he managed to go backstage to meet her. As an actress, she was not confined by the stodgy rules of the times; she maintained her virtue entirely on her own merit, Lord Bennington explained, without confining herself to silly edicts imposed by society. They had discovered that they had much in common and--

"I realized that I was in love. I did not expect to be. I am not an old man, you know, but I am not young any more. Still, she makes me feel as if I am young again, but with the seasoning of a mature man who knows what he wants."

His father looked at St. John as if he expected a response. St. John said nothing. That he was thinking that his father was the very epitome of an old fool who had obviously fallen for a calculating strumpet was something better left unsaid. At least for the time being.

"We shall go together to the theatre tonight," Lord Bennington suggested enthusiastically. "You shall see her perform first, and you shall understand what I am telling you. Then we shall return home and you shall meet her in person."

"I cannot go to the theatre tonight, I have a prior engagement which I cannot break," St. John lied. "Another time."

"Tomorrow night, then!"

"Alas, I am spoken for. But we can make plans to meet with your Helen of Troy, certainly. Do you ever dine at home?"

"Oh, yes, certainly, although I confess we are not at home as often as we would like. Marguerite has a great many friends, you see, and we are often invited out."

"Elizabeth must get quite lonely," St. John said.

"Oh, no, not at all. Marguerite's protégé, Eleanor Dorchester, is there. She is devoted to Marguerite, and Marguerite to her. They are quite like sisters. She and Elizabeth have become very good friends."

"Eleanor Dorchester? I don't believe I know any Dorchesters."

"No, you would not know her. Nell—she is called Nell—is a young

actress, quite skilled at her craft. Marguerite predicts that she will be quite the rage. Just now she is playing small roles, ingenues, that sort of thing. She's quite pretty. She has been very good for your sister. Gets her out of that shell of hers. You know how shy Elizabeth is. She's becoming more poised. It's a very good arrangement, having her there."

"Is now the best time to have an actress living there, with Elizabeth due to make her debut this Season?"

Lord Bennington appeared taken aback, as if the thought had not occurred to him. "Why, surely that is of no consequence," he said. "Elizabeth is a girl of absolute and unquestionable virtue. I wonder that you can suggest such a thing. Really, Sinjin, I wonder at the cast of your mind sometimes."

"My mind? It is no more than what the minds of everyone in the ton will be thinking when they see Lady Elizabeth Bennington in the society of an actress!"

"Oh, bosh. You are becoming quite stuffy, my boy. They'll think nothing of the sort. Nell is most presentable. When you meet her, you will see what I mean."

"I have met her," St. John disclosed. "I came upon them at the dressmaker's shop."

"Then you know the truth of what I say. She is as regal as a member of the royal family—more so, if one tells the truth, as no one can say that the Hanovers are particularly regal in their bearing." Lord Bennington leaned in so that his words could not be overheard. "In fact, the Prince Regent has shown an interest in Nell. I have seen him at the theatre, and after the performance, he has gone to see her."

"The Prince Regent! Is she his mistress?"

"No! I told you, Nell's virtue is unquestioned. But I suspicion his motives. Why else would he be so attentive if not because he has noticed her remarkable beauty? I have said as much to Marguerite, but she assures me that Nell is in no danger. Marguerite is a most vigilant abigail. Really, Sinjin, again, I marvel at your thoughts. You are displaying a rather foul perspective. I hope that you will not be

so coarse when you visit; Marguerite and Nell are not at all accustomed to such vulgar manners, you know.”

Aunt Augusta Weighs In

Lord St. John went to his London house in an ill temper. The idea of his father lecturing him on his manners! His father, Lord Bennington, the rogue who was known throughout London as a man who had no more interest in a woman's virtue than he had in a vicar's sermon, a man who relished a wager on the most absurd provocation, a man who embraced folly as if it were a favorite mistress, to chide him for vulgar manners!

"Sir?" Linden, answering the door, raised his eyebrows questioningly when St. John entered the house, slammed the door behind him, and thrust his hat into Linden's hands.

Because St. John did not entertain in London, taking full advantage of the fact that, as a bachelor of means, he could rely on ample invitations out when he wished the company of others, he kept a simple household at his London residence. Linden served a multitude of purposes; he was content to be butler, valet, and general factotum. He preferred the variety of his duties and St. John preferred to be unencumbered. A maid and a cook made up the rest of the staffing for the London house, neither overworked, as St. John made few demands upon them. The arrangement suited all of them and the staff regarded St. John with affection; not having a Lady St. John in residence was an advantage, they agreed.

"I suppose you have heard the news?"

"What news?" Without being asked, Linden followed his master into the study and poured whiskey from the decanter.

"My father has married an actress."

"Ah. I believe Lord Bennington is the envy of his friends, married and otherwise, for his choice of a wife."

Linden was immune to St. John's glare.

"Is he? You might have written me to tell me of this news."

"Your message last week said that you would be arriving today. I only learned of the marriage two days ago. I did not think it would serve any purpose to write when you would find out yourself in person."

"He's a fool."

"Have you met her?"

"Not yet. He wanted me to join him at the theatre tonight to see her perform. What do you know of Nell Dorchester?"

"The actress?"

"Of course, the actress! Is there another Nell Dorchester?"

"Not to my knowledge," Linden said, unperturbed by his master's irritability. "She is the most beautiful female on the stage."

"You have seen her?"

"I have had that fortune. Why do you ask? I thought Lord Bennington was married to Marguerite Winslow, not Nell Dorchester."

"That is who he is married to, of course!" St. John snapped. "It's bad enough that he's married to a woman so much younger; do not, I pray you, make it worse by thinking him married to someone even younger!"

Linden surveyed St. John with an assessing gaze. "Has your lordship dined?"

"What the devil—no, I have not."

"I thought not. I'll speak to Mrs. Hemings and she will send up something for you. Perhaps you will feel less bilious when you have eaten."

"I am not bilious!"

"Lady Reynolds called earlier; I told her that you were expected today. She asks you to call upon her."

"Aunt Augusta? She must be as dismayed by the news as I am."

Aunt Augusta was his mother's older sister. She had been devoted to her younger sister and distraught at her death. As St. John struggled with his grief and loss, it had been Aunt Augusta, not his father, who provided the comfort that sustained him through those dark months. And it had been Aunt Augusta who had moved into the manor to tend to him and the infant Elizabeth, bringing her brood with her so that St. John could have his five cousins to distract him. His father had gone to London; he had said that it was too hard to stay in the house where his wife's presence would constantly remind him of his loss.

Perhaps he meant it. But it had been then that St. John, only eleven years old, had begun to view his father with critical eyes. Aunt Augusta had felt the same, he knew. He had not been so young that he did not understand her reaction to the gossip that traveled from London. Lord Bennington was assuaging his grief in the company of a notorious member of the ton, or he had lost extravagantly at cards.

No doubt she was inflamed at the news of his father's *mésalliance* and wanted to let him know how she felt about it. Aunt Augusta was not one to mince words.

As he ate the lamb stew which Mrs. Hemings had brought to him, St. John felt his spirits rise at the thought of what Aunt Augusta would say to his father when she saw him.

"Linden!" he called. "I'm going to see my aunt."

"Will you dine at home, my lord?"

"No, at my club." He might as well face the amused speculation of London and his club was as likely as any other place to bring him in contact with his acquaintances who would be only too eager to share with him their thoughts on his newly acquired stepmother. On second thought, "Yes, I believe I will dine at home. Tell Mrs. Hemings not to go to any great trouble over what to prepare." He could not hold off his introduction to the new Lady Bennington for long. Perhaps it would be best if he stopped by without advance notice. Catch them all off guard, and perhaps catch a glimpse of the protégé as well. She was flying high if she planned to entice the Prince Regent. Father made it sound as if she was as pure as a

vestal virgin, but if Prinny were hovering, he was likely planning to be successful in his endeavors.

The thought made him cross. To think of that beauty with the creaking corsets of Prince George was an assault against one's sensibilities. Did she think that becoming the mistress of the Prince Regent would lead to better things? Then she was a fool. He would cast her off eventually, and then what? She would become another man's bit of muslin. And another. That beauty would be marred by the crass commerce of intimacy as it was practiced without---

St. John stopped his thoughts. She could be an actress, a prince's mistress, or she could go to the devil. What was it to him?

His aunt greeted him affectionately. Seeing her was always a delight, and a pain as well; she reminded him of his mother, who remained beautiful and young in his memory. Aunt Augusta retained her fine-boned features and her hair, although it had faded from brilliant bronze to a paler hue in which white was generously present, remained as abundant as ever.

"Sinjin, it's wonderful to see you again. You spend so much time in the country that you become quite a stranger to us. I suppose that if Elizabeth were not making her debut you would not have come to London for another month."

"Or two," he grinned. "Are you taking charge of the arrangements for her debut?"

"I am helping Marguerite with them."

"Mar—the actress?"

"Lady Bennington," his aunt corrected him.

His aunt instructed the maid to bring refreshments. St. John protested; he had just eaten and was not hungry, but Aunt Augusta paid no mind.

Once inside the drawing room, with the doors closed and privacy theirs to command, Aunt August arched her slender eyebrows. "Now, then, tell me what you are about. You disapprove of your father's choice of wife."

"I should have thought you would as well. How could he, after

marriage to my mother, choose an actress?"

"Very easily, I should think. She is lovely and witty and she amuses him. He drinks less and gambles less."

"He sounds very respectable, to hear you tell it. Perhaps all men of his age should wed wives two decades younger and they would turn into reformed characters."

Aunt Augusta considered this as she sat on her chair, her knitting in the basket at her feet, her cream-and-black striped skirts arrayed around her. "Perhaps they would," she said thoughtfully. "I sometimes wonder how Bertram would have fared, had I died before him."

"I do not think he would have fallen under the spell of an actress," St. John retorted, thinking of the quiet, scholarly uncle who had taught him to read *The Iliad* in Latin. He had spent hours with his uncle in the library after his mother's death, filling his dark hours with the stories of heroes who were stymied by the Fates and surrendered to destiny. It had, in its way, helped his sadness.

"Do you think your father is under a spell? Have you seen them together?"

St. John knew that his aunt's question was deliberate. She would have known that he had not had time to do so. "Not yet," he replied grudgingly. "I have been spared that delight."

"She is not what you are expecting. Oh, yes, she is lovely and she belongs to a profession which is viewed with suspicion by those who are more than happy to attend a performance but just as eager to look down upon those who provide it. I certainly hope that you would not be so hypocritical."

"I am not so avid a theatre-goer as my father," St. John answered stiffly.

"Marguerite makes no pretense of being anything other than what she is. She is known for her exquisite sense of fashion; she will do well by Elizabeth and will choose wisely for her wardrobe."

"What of her protégé?" he asked, intentionally drawing the young woman into the conversation.

“Nell? Yes, she has a sense of style that is her own, but it is Marguerite who will know how to outfit your sister so that she achieves success.”

“And the Prince Regent? Does he not object that this young woman is less than fashionable?”

“I did not say she was unfashionable, I said she has her own sense of style. And what has the Prince to do with any of this?” Aunt Augusta demanded.

The maid brought in a tray and, despite the fact that he had eaten, St. John was persuaded to take a slice of seed cake, always a favorite of his, and to accept a cup of tea, which Aunt August poured, dismissing the maid.

“Father mentioned that the Prince Regent attends her performances.”

“Does he? She’s far too level-headed to succumb to his silly blandishments,” Aunt Augusta said.

Foolishly, he felt something stir in him, something pleased and hopeful, as if the fact that the goddess could see through the Prince Regent would make her more amenable to St. John.

“Do you think so,” St. John asked, keeping his tone casual, as if he did not particularly care and was only making light conversation. “Not many actresses would find themselves immune to the blandishments, as you put it, of a royal lover.”

“When you meet Nell, you will see the truth of what I say.”

“I have met her,” he answered.

That was all he said, but Aunt Augusta studied him with her warm brown eyes. “I see,” she said.

And he had the feeling that she did indeed, see.

An Encounter Along Rotten Row

St. John spent a restless night, finding sleep elusive. His aunt's acceptance of his father's entirely unsuitable marriage was jarring. His own feelings for a young woman who was also being pursued by the Prince Regent were unsettling. His sister's forthcoming debut, and the peril it now faced as a result of Lord Bennington's marriage to an actress, was worrying; Elizabeth was a gentle girl, far too fragile to handle the crass, calculating gossips of the beau monde.

He did not wish to admit it, but he had neglected his sister, preferring life in the country to London. That left Elizabeth dependent upon his father for company. No wonder she had succumbed so easily to the attention of an actress. And her protégé, the self-possessed, exquisite Nell Dorchester. The attention that she should have been confident of receiving from her family had been denied her through their father's self-absorption and her brother's own---own what? Preference to live his life without accepting the emotional responsibilities that went with family? Was he so selfish? Or had he adopted the armor of distance after the death of his mother because it was easier not to open one's self to affection, which could so easily lead to sadness?

It was just after dawn when he arose from bed, far too early for a London gentleman, but the perfect hour for a man who rose with the sun when on his country estate because there was work to be done. He didn't bother to awaken Linden; he could dress himself without assistance.

He saddled his horse and headed for Rotten Row. At this hour of the day, a ride would be just the thing and there would be few others out to bother him. It was not a fashionable hour.

London, early in the morning, acquired a charm that it did not have during the busy daytime when the streets and sidewalks teemed with carriages and pedestrians, as the noise and smells of the capital conspired to engulf one's nostrils and ears by overpowering the senses. In the morning, with the sun just rising, the city was, if not precisely quiet, at least respectful of the dawn.

He was accustomed to being in the saddle early when at home, starting every morning with a ride over the grounds. It was not the same in London, but as his horse trotted along, he was able to enjoy the scenery around him. London, too, had its allure, he realized. It was simply more alluring when there were fewer people about.

His lip curled. He had spoken too soon. Another rider was coming his way, on the opposite side of the path. No matter, a simple tipping of the hat would suffice for a greeting.

As the horse, a high-spirited black who displayed an admirable gait, approached closer, St. John's eyes widened. Astride—astride!—the horse was the protégé. She was wearing what looked to be—but surely could not be—men's trousers, a man's shirt, a waistcoat and coat, and boots. And a hat, which she tipped toward him with a grin which seemed to carry a faintly impish air.

"Lord St. John," she said, pulling on the reins with a firm grip. "You are, I see, also an acolyte of the dawn."

She was just as lovely in male garb as she had been yesterday in her frock. Her golden hair gleamed beneath her sober black hat. Her brown eyes held a hint of mischief hiding in their depths.

"I—am used to the country," he said.

"I am not, but I own that I prefer to ride when others are not riding."

If she rode during the hours when the fashionable ones rode with the purpose of being seen, her attire would be the talk of London.

"So I can imagine," he replied.

She smiled. "As you see, I ride to please myself."

"I only hope that you do not persuade my sister to follow your example. It would ruin her chances of a successful debut if she were

seen to ride along Rotten Row in the clothing of a gentleman.”

Her lips, the underlip full, the upper lip curved as if her mouth were some exotic blossom attached to a female who was, in reality a wood nymph, were captivating. “So you attribute to me the status of a gentleman. That is very kind of you. Considering my profession.”

What the devil was she talking about? “I am referring to your wardrobe, of course. It is most unseemly for you to be dressed as you are and I pray that you will not bring disgrace upon my sister, who plainly holds you in esteem.”

“I feel the same. Your sister is a gracious, kind-hearted young woman and I too, hope that she will make a successful debut, one that brings her a suitor who is worthy of her.”

“Then we are in accord.”

She raised her hat and inclined her head with a graceful gesture made all the more attractive because it so expertly mimicked the movements of a gentleman tipping his hat. She knew it, too; he could tell by the curve of her lips, those lips which would have sent a poet into raptures to find the rhymes to match to their eloquent curves.

“You will confess, then, that it is a risk for you to be seen in this manner of dress in a place which is known for giving rise to all manner of speculation.”

She made a show of rising in the saddle to look behind her. “I see no one who can give rise to speculation,” she replied, “except of course, yourself. And I do not think you would do such a thing if you care for your sister.”

“Of course I care for my sister! I am troubled that she is in the company of a young woman who, it seems, has little regard for the conventions of society. Do you not realize how much harm this can do? Is it not bad enough that our father has married an actress and given cause for tongues to wag? Should my sister suffer as well from the realization that another actress living in the household dresses as a man, in public, and goes riding where she is sure to be seen?”

"You mistake me, my lord. I ride in the morning so that I will not be seen," she told him with hauteur. "It is far too early for the young blades and the young ladies to be out. They will ride when it is the proper time for others to see them."

"Perhaps the Prince Regent rides early?"

"The Prince Regent?" she repeated, but there was an expression of wariness in her eyes. "I do not see him."

"He is, I am told, an admirer of yours."

"You spoke earlier of speculation and gossip. Are you one of those who enjoys those past times?"

"You are dodging my question."

"How should I know when the Prince Regent goes riding?" she asked.

"Perhaps you came to meet him."

"Why should I seek to meet the Prince Regent?"

"He is fond of actresses. You are an actress."

Her brown eyes met his gaze with a look that he could not read. He could see anger in their depths, but her anger, although it plainly inflamed her, did not overrule her. Instead, she gave him an appraising glance that did not veil her contempt. "You are insufferable," she answered and, digging her boots into her horse's side, she set off at a gallop.

It was not the encounter that he had hoped to have with her. But what sort of meeting could he have expected, he asked himself as he headed back to his house. She was an actress, the Prince Regent had his eye on her and she was not, from what St. John had learned, dissuading the future king from his pursuit of her. She was undoubtedly holding out for something more than royal favors. A house, perhaps? Jewels? Who knew what a young woman would bargain for if she chose to accept a prince for a lover?

Was all of this part of a carefully wrought plan? As Lady Bennington, Marguerite Winslow could bring a semblance of the aristocracy to her social encounters. Would that make Nell

Dorchester more attractive as a mistress for the Prince Regent, and if so, how did that affect his sister?

Meeting Marguerite

He returned to his house quite out of sorts. Mrs. Hemings, alerted by Linden that the master was in a foul humor, prepared a breakfast of eggs, sausages, and thickly sliced toast spread with strawberry marmalade; that, she was sure, along with a bracing cup of hot coffee, would bring him round.

Linden brought the tray into the dining room where St. John was going through the mail that had arrived during his absence.

"I shall not lack for entertainment, I see," St. John said. "Should I wish to, I am invited to three balls and four suppers for the remainder of the month."

"This came just now," Linden said. "From Lord Bennington."

St. John put down the coffee. "Father cannot possibly be up and about already; it's barely ten o'clock." He opened the message.

Dear St. John,

Please join us at two o'clock for luncheon. Marguerite dearly longs to meet you and I shall not be content until you see for yourself how happy she makes me. I shall not accept an excuse, my boy! You must come so that our family may be complete!

"It seems that I am commanded to appear," he said, putting the note down and, taking up his fork and knife, setting himself to do justice to Mrs. Hemings' excellent breakfast.

"Half dress, my lord?"

"Of course."

"Brown, black, or blue?"

"Blue."

"Waistcoat?"

“Cream.”

“Boots?”

“Hessians.”

“I shall put your clothing out for you, my lord.”

“As always, Linden, you are invaluable.”

“I do strive to be so, my lord.”

“Please tell Mrs. Hemings that she will not need to bother with lunch.”

“And supper?”

“No . . . I might as well venture to White’s. No doubt the wagering has already begun on how long it will take before my father’s matrimonial reformation is challenged. After meeting la Winslow, perhaps I shall be better informed to make my own bet.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You sound disapproving, Linden.”

“Not at all, sir. But I am planning to attend the theatre tomorrow and I should be grievously disappointed if today’s luncheon does not go off well and it should afflict Lady Bennington’s performance.”

St. John placed his knife and fork on his now-empty plate. “I shall endeavor to do my best not to ruin Her Ladyship’s humor,” he promised.

“Thank you, sir.”

When he entered his father’s house, Elizabeth was waiting for him. “How handsome you look, Sinjin.”

“And how beautiful you look,” he said, kissing his sister fondly. “Is that new?”

“Yes, do you like it?”

“Very much. I don’t recall ever seeing you wear red.”

“Marguerite said that it suits me.”

“Does she?”

“Dear Sinjin, please don’t use that forbidding tone. You must give her a chance, you know,” Elizabeth cajoled, linking arms with him as they walked toward the dining room.

“Must I? Why?”

“Because she is deserving of it. Papa is so much happier now and it’s delightful to see them together. Promise me that you will not be so stern with her? You look quite alarming when you are stern.”

“It is not my intention to be stern,” he said. Dear Elizabeth, so young and so unaware of how fragile a thing a young girl’s reputation was. He wondered if the protégé would be joining them. His morning encounter with Nell Dorchester did not indicate that another meeting, so soon after, would be an improvement.

He needn’t have been concerned. When he and Elizabeth entered the dining room, only Lord Bennington and his new wife were in the room.

Marguerite Winslow went to greet him in a rustle of olive green satin which set off her brilliant auburn hair and sparkling blue eyes. He was surprised to see that she was actually a rather petite woman; he had expected a Junoesque female, and not this dainty specimen of femininity.

“Bennie has told me so much about you,” she said. “I could not wait any longer, but must meet you without delay. Thank you for coming.”

Bennie? He supposed that was his father, grinning at his wife’s side.

“Lady Bennington,” he said formally, bowing from the waist. He was absurdly relieved to see that the sapphire ring worn by his mother did not adorn the new Lady Bennington’s finger.

“Marguerite,” she corrected him. “I am unused to the title and in my intimate circle, which I hope is where you will be, I remain Marguerite.”

At least she didn’t expect him to call her Mamma, he thought. He

simply bowed again and took his seat at the table.

The luncheon was simple: soup; turbot and new potatoes, with vegetables; cheese, and fruit. His father had always preferred richer repasts and St. John wondered if this was another one of those reforming efforts which the actress had inflicted upon Lord Bennington.

“Are you fond of the theatre, St. John?” Marguerite asked as they began eating.

St. John noticed that she cut her food into small bites and chewed slowly. While she ate, her blue eyes were intent upon the others as they spoke, as if the conversation and not the food was the reason for them to be at the table. It was, he had to admit, a disarming trait. No doubt it had been very effective in snaring his father; older men relished being the center of attention when they were no longer able to compete with younger men for a woman’s attention.

“I am indifferent,” he said. “I go upon occasion.”

“Sinjin prefers the country life to London,” Lord Bennington explained. “He is happiest tramping about the grounds with his walking stick and Cassius for company.”

“Cassius?” Marguerite inquired.

“A mere hound,” St. John answered. “No particular pedigree and no special talents. He is content to accompany me on my walks.”

“Sinjin is concealing his affections,” Elizabeth laughed. “He dearly loves Cassius and Cassius is devoted to him.”

“Did you bring him with you?”

“No, he would not fare well in the city. He enjoys his freedom and there is none of that for a dog in London.”

“A pity. I am very fond of dogs, but you are accurate. It is unkind to confine them in a city as noisy and crowded as London is. I look forward to meeting Cassius,” Marguerite said. “When I leave the stage, I shall be able to get a dog as well. Bennie has agreed.”

Bennie.

St. John kept his face blank. "Leave the stage? Are you planning to do so?"

"Eventually. First I want to make certain that Nell is established. After that has happened and she has begun to perform lead roles, I shall feel more confident about leaving her. She is extremely talented, but the acting world is fiercely competitive and she must win her laurels on her own. As she shall," Marguerite declared in a voice that rang out as if she were delivering a speech from one of her plays. "She is enormously talented. Have you seen her perform?"

Not on stage, he thought, but having seen her in male attire, astride a horse, he could not help but regard her appearance as a performance of sorts.

"I have not had that pleasure," he said.

"You must. She is exquisite. She is performing tonight. It's a lovely role. She plays a young girl who masquerades as a youth in order to be near the young man who has captured her heart. He, sadly, is not worthy of her. She has some very good lines. Although she is not the lead, she steals every scene that she is in. There are experienced actors far beyond her years who do not have her sense of timing."

"You are very proud of her," he said. So that was where she had acquired the ease with which she wore men's clothing.

"Very much so," Marguerite acknowledged. "It is splendid to see someone so young and talented grow in her prowess."

"You have known her long?"

"All her life."

"She is a relative, perhaps?"

"Only in my heart," Marguerite said, and then, so deftly that he did not realize how skillfully she had managed to change the subject, she was bringing Elizabeth into the conversation. "Nell and Elizabeth have become great friends, have you not, my dear?"

Elizabeth happily continued the conversation. It was clear that she and the protégé were friends, at least in his sister's opinion. Was

Nell Dorchester a true friend or was she an actress here as well, feigning friendship so that she could capitalize upon the loyalty of a young girl who knew so little of the world that she could not possibly suspect the machinations of others?

As Elizabeth spoke, St. John glanced at Marguerite. Her eyes met his over the rim of her wine glass. Her gaze was direct. Was there a challenge in those eyes? He could not be sure. Was she warning him from seeking to find out more about Nell Dorchester? Or was she daring him to try?

A Decision is Made

There was something unsettling about Marguerite Winslow Bennington, St. John thought as he was admitted into White's, greeted with affection by several of his comrades from his school days, endured having toasts to his great fortune in acquiring such a glamorous stepmother as Marguerite Winslow, and then invited to wager upon how long the actress would remain the toast of Drury Lane, now that she was Lady Bennington. He begged off the wager with the quip that he could not afford such stakes while his father was in town.

"Lord Bennington has become quite the devoted husband," complained George Bayard, one of the friends from the long-ago days at Oxford who had been sent down for some sort of misbehavior. "He's no longer any fun at all."

This was not the first person to comment upon his father's reformed character. Was it true that Lord Bennington now eschewed the vices he had been wont to enjoy? During lunch, Marguerite had made no claims to a life of abstinence from the past times which entertained the upper classes. She enjoyed betting on horse races, she told St. John without apology, and never missed the Newmarket races in April and October. She was, she confessed, a martyr to fashion and could not abide to be thought behind the times. Of course, she had added, it was fortunate that she had her own money and had invested wisely so that she could indulge in her little sins. He wondered if that disclosure had been intended to ease his concerns that she might have married his father for the Bennington wealth, or if its purpose, if she knew that it was St. John and not his father who controlled the pursestrings, was to delude him into thinking that she was actually a model of frugality, with financial means of her own?

He decided that it would be worthwhile to inquire of Carstairs what he knew of Marguerite Winslow's finances. Then he sat down with a

brandy and joined the others at the window. He had no intention of making one of the outrageous wagers for which the spectators at White's window were famous, but it was a diversion that could take his thoughts away from the mystery of Marguerite Winslow and her protégé.

It was not long before the attention of the window watchers was captured.

"It's an equerry from the Palace!" exclaimed George. "Is he coming in?"

"Equerries won't be admitted into White's," derided another gentlemen. "A servant is a servant, after all, even if he does serve the royal family."

"I'll wager he's bringing a lovely to the Palace for the Prince Regent's pleasure," declared George. "What say you, Sinjin? Will you wager?"

"Why should the Prince Regent be sending an equerry to procure a woman on the public street?" St. John inquired, bored with the exchange.

"Will you not wager?" George pressed.

"I will not."

"I will," announced another young man, unknown to St. John. "What's more, I'll wager that she will appear before that carriage across the street has passed out of sight."

Other gamblers, eager to expand upon the terms, pronounced their adaptations to the proposed wager. St. John allowed his brandy to be refilled. How tedious this was. He ought to simply go home, or perhaps he ought to join a different club. Boodle's, perhaps.

"Isn't that Nell Dorchester?" queried George.

"Where?" St. John inquired, rising to his feet.

"Aha, so you too have fallen under her spell!"

"I have never even seen her playacting," St. John evaded. "I have merely heard of her."

"You must do more than hear of her," George raved. "She is a meal for a man's eyes."

"Hush—she's going to the equerry! The carriage is still within sight, but soon, soon, it shall not be!"

"She is being helped into the royal carriage! The carriage is turning!"

"Why should she be getting into the royal carriage?" St. John asked, his heart sinking as he realized that the rumors were true.

"You have been rustivating in the country," George said. "All London knows that she is the new favorite of the Prince Regent. He goes to the theatre at least once a week to see her, and he visits her backstage. Now, see, she is being brought to the Palace. There is a new favorite gracing the Prince Regent's bed. A wager on how long she will remain the favorite!"

As the gentlemen clamored to join the betting, St. John left the club. To think of that lovely, independent-minded young woman accepting the role of a royal mistress was troubling. While it was true that he had considered offering to make her his mistress, he was at least young and, he hoped, not unattractive. What, he wondered, would Marguerite Winslow say if he offered her protégé his protection in those terms which a woman of the world would understand. And which, no doubt, she had availed herself of before convincing his gullible father that she deserved matrimony.

The matter must be attended to with discretion, he thought as he sat in his study that night and considered. Was Marguerite so desirous of fame that she would wish her protégé to become a royal mistress? Or would she not prefer the girl to have a discreet lover who would not subject her to public disgrace? For, no matter what, eventually the Prince Regent would move on. Would it not be preferable for Nell Dorchester to enjoy the constancy of a younger man of means who would ensure that she benefitted from the transaction?

He summoned Linden.

"Take this to the Theatre Royale and see that it is given into the hands of Marguerite Winslow and no other," he directed.

Linden eyed the sealed missive dubiously. "Can you not send it to your father's house?"

"No, I cannot."

"Very well," Linden sighed. "I suppose I shall be able to deliver it. You won't object, my lord, if I stay for the remainder of the performance?"

"As long as you deliver this, you may stay overnight at the theatre and be first for tomorrow's performance."

Linden came home late, but St. John had expected no less.

"You delivered the letter?"

"Of course," Linden said. "She accepted it and said to thank you. I had no idea what she was thanking me for."

"I have invited her to join me for lunch tomorrow."

Linden was virtually impossible to shock, but his fair eyebrows rose so high in his forehead that they almost blended in with his blond locks. "And your father?"

"My letter informed her that the invitation was for her alone."

"Is that not rather . . . untoward?"

"Ease your vulgar frame of mind; I have no designs upon my father's new wife."

Linden sighed in relief. "For which I am devoutly grateful. Such a scandalous liaison would have even London shocked. I should have to find another position else my own reputation would be besmirched."

"Your reputation," St. John retorted, "is no doubt well known to every lady's maid in Mayfair. Not to mention every Bow Street Runner in the city."

"It adds to my charm, my lord. If you've no further need of me, I'm to bed."

"Before you seek your rest from your exhausting labors, please inform Mrs. Hemings that I will have a guest for lunch. Light fare,

but impressive.”

“You are quite sure that you aren’t planning a seduction between the courses?” Linden pressed. “If you are, I should like to have you write my character now so that I may proceed to find employment before the shame ruins my prospects entirely.”

“Go to bed,” St. John ordered, trying not to laugh at Linden’s cheek. The man was as impudent as one would expect of a youth who had come from one of London’s most nefarious neighborhoods. But Linden had wits and he had made himself indispensable to St. John, who could not have abided a more attentive valet. Linden was versatile, amusing, and free of snobbery, unlike some gentlemen’s valets who lived their aspirations through their masters’ pedigrees. Linden truly was invaluable, but St. John was not going to divulge his intentions to his manservant. The keeping of a mistress would be his business and his alone.

The Proposal

He was, to his surprise, a trifle nervous as he awaited Marguerite Winslow's arrival for lunch. The topic he intended to bring up was a delicate one, but he hoped that his father's wife was sufficiently worldly to perceive the advantages of what he would propose.

"Lady Bennington," he greeted her when Linden brought Marguerite into the dining room. "Thank you for accepting my invitation."

"Not at all," she said. "I assume that you wish to have a practical discussion about my intentions regarding your father. You doubtless want to be reassured that I will not humiliate him or drag the family name through the mud. Thank you," she said when he poured a glass of wine for her.

She was dressed in a sea-green gown with a fringed sash around her waist that emphasized her perfect figure. Her hair was piled upon the top of her head in an elegant profusion of auburn. Her scent was unfamiliar to him, but arresting in its fragrance. She wore a diamond necklace that was not, he knew, one of the Bennington jewels. Perhaps she had told the truth when she said she had her own means. Or perhaps, he thought realistically, she had been gifted with the necklace by a past lover.

"That was not precisely my purpose in inviting you here," he said.

"No? You surprise me. Did you invite me here to obtain my assurance that I will be circumspect throughout the duration of the Season so that Elizabeth's debut will be a success?"

"That was not my purpose either, although I certainly hope that you will treat my sister's coming out with the proper degree of . . . shall we say regard, and leave it at that?"

"I am very fond of Elizabeth. I believe that she is fond of me. We are blessed to have a happy household."

"I am gratified to hear it. Shall we enjoy lunch? Mrs. Hemings is an excellent cook and I provide her with too few opportunities to display her talents. Please, sit down."

He held out the chair for her so that she could be seated. Sitting down across from her, St. John served her from the platter of Mrs. Heming's incomparable cold roast mutton, which had been first baked in a delectable sauce. The carrots were sweet; Mrs. Hemings was a martinet for the care of her garden and her vegetables were, she assured him, vastly finer than anything that could be obtained from the marketplace. There was custard, light and tasty. The menu was deceptively simple; it was in the tasting that his cook's talent for adding herbs and flavorings became evident.

"Your father would enjoy this repast, I think," Marguerite said directly. "I wonder that you did not invite him. I hope that you will do so while we are all in London during the Season. He believes that I have gone to call upon a friend. I did not wish him to think that you do not wish for his company."

"I shall certainly invite my father to dine. And Elizabeth as well. And you, again. I seldom entertain, that is all. As I said, my cook is enjoying the opportunity to show off her skills. My father, previously, preferred far richer dishes than this. You seem to have transformed his palate."

"He was troubled by severe gout," Marguerite answered. "I have persuaded him that it is better to eat wisely and avoid the resulting pain that he suffered from his choices. You have avoided my question. If you are not concerned that I intend to squander the family's wealth, and you are not fearful that I will ruin Elizabeth's prospects for her debut, why have you invited me here?"

He had not expected to approach the matter so forthrightly. A proper lady would not have been this direct. However, he preferred this candor to the sort of waltzing with words that a lady of delicate sensibilities would have employed.

"It is a topic of some delicacy," he began. "It concerns your protégé. You have been quite mysterious regarding her origins."

"Why should her origins be of any concern to you?"

"She is my sister's companion. London society is fastidious about such things."

"Have no fear. Nell's past is her own. It will not affect Elizabeth."

"I have heard rumors that your protégé is the object of the Prince Regent's desire."

"That is absurd."

"He has been seen in her company. He has been backstage in her dressing room. She has been seen in one of the royal carriages."

"I see. And you wish me to counsel her to be less visible in what you regard as her indiscretions?" Marguerite took a bite of the roast lamb. "My compliments to your cook."

"I shall convey your compliments. I assume that, as her mentor, you provide your protégé with valuable advice?"

"Nell is a most sagacious young woman; she requires very little advice. She is not inclined to be reckless."

"You do not regard the taking of a royal lover as reckless?"

A morsel of carrot rose upon the fork in Marguerite's hand. "I suppose for some women, it would be a practical arrangement. But Nell is not such a woman."

"She is of age?"

"She is nineteen. Not of age, no, but she is no schoolgirl. If you fear that Nell's influence will be an unsavory one upon your sister, I can promise you that your worries are groundless. Nell is not that sort of woman. Although she has only been on the stage for two years, she is well aware that human nature is not always reminiscent of sainthood."

"You do not deny that she is the object of the Prince Regent's attention?"

Marguerite's gaze turned to the piece of roast lamb that she was slicing on her plate. "If the Prince Regent is pleased with her performance, does that necessarily mean that he is a seducer?"

"What other reason would he have for pursuing a woman who is so

many years his junior? You will, I trust, forgive me for this mathematical interpretation.”

Marguerite smiled in amusement. “You need not be cryptic,” she said. “I am well aware that I am much younger than your father.”

“I should assume as much.”

Marguerite sipped her wine. “Should your cook be complimented for the quality of this vintage?”

“I am pleased that you enjoy it. I owe that to Linden. He has an unerring talent for choosing wines.”

“Linden?”

“My butler and valet. A most versatile servant.”

“I envy you your household. Your father’s servants, except for Billings, are not nearly so adept. But you did not invite me here to discuss servants.”

“No. I am sure that you are concerned about your protégé’s wellbeing.”

“Of course. My lord, this conversation appears to me to have no destination. You did not ask me to dine with you so that we could discuss the conduct of Nell.”

“During yesterday’s luncheon, you mentioned that your ambition is to retire from the stage when Miss Dorchester is sufficiently established as an actress. Then, you will spend your time in the country. Miss Dorchester, as a young woman on her own in London, will need a protector. Someone who can look out for her in the absence of parents or a guardian.”

He thought it was going well. He had provided an introduction that sounded, to his mind, quite dispassionate.

“Nell is most admirably capable of looking out for herself,” Marguerite said.

“A woman alone, in London? I think that is naïve.”

“I was a woman alone in London until I married your father. I have long been a widow and after my first husband died, I did not choose

to marry again before now.”

He had not known she was a widow. Not that it signified; a shrewd woman could use her widowhood to her advantage.

“My condolences upon your loss,” he said automatically.

“No condolences are needed. He was, unfortunately, a drunkard and a wastrel. An actor, but not a very accomplished one, although he was related to the Kembles.”

“The royal family of the stage,” he said lightly. “It seems that there are various royal families. A royal favorite, however, cannot be confident that royalty’s favor will last.”

“I am not sure that I understand you. Or perhaps I understand you too well. Are you warning me that if, as you believe, Nell were to be taken up by the Prince Regent, she would be discarded and bereft when his interest waned?”

He could not have phrased the matter so adroitly.

“Yes,” he said. “As a young woman, cast off from a royal lover, she would suffer in her reputation but also in her welfare.”

“I should never allow Nell to be so ill-used.”

“Would it not be better if she were to have someone she could rely on now? Someone who would not be so fickle? Someone who would see that her needs were met and that she remained safe and cared for?”

“St. John,” she began, studying him intently, “are you asking me for permission to marry Nell?”

He choked on the wine he had sipped. “Marry an actress! Good God, no! I am proposing to make her my mistress!”

St. John Considers His State

"Mrs. Hemings is not happy to be deprived of one of her choice cutlets," Linden said as he handed the raw meat to his master. "But when I explained that you suffered a black eye as a result of an unfortunate fall, she relented."

"Thank you," St. John replied.

"I did not tell her that your injury was the result of a well-aimed blow from Marguerite Winslow's reticule."

"The woman must keep gold nuggets in her reticule," St. John complained as he adjusted the meat to an advantageous position covering the bruised, darkening orbit of his eye.

"Not a bad weapon," Linden considered. "I hear that she is a wealthy woman in her own right, so she could very well have gold in her reticule. I have not heard that; it seems that it would be a lure to thieves. But perhaps she is as capable of dealing with them as she is with . . . what did you say, by the way, that stirred her to such a response? You did not criticize her acting, I trust? She'd not be likely to take that calmly."

"No, I did not. Please bring me whiskey and extend my apologies to Mrs. Hemings for the regrettable usage to which her cutlet has been put. Tell her not to go to any trouble for supper. I shall be dining in—for the foreseeable future—but at present, I do not anticipate a great appetite."

He thought he had managed the matter artfully. As an actress, she could not be ignorant of the fact that many gentlemen chose women of her profession as mistresses. He was not proposing to treat Nell Dorchester ill, nor to deprive her in any way. He desired a domestic arrangement which would have been circumspect and beneficial to both of them. He would enjoy her company and her loveliness, and she would benefit from his financial providence. It seemed, at least

it had seemed, to be a most advantageous offer. As Miss Dorchester was only nineteen, he thought that he had done the right thing in going to Marguerite with his offer. Why she had suddenly, after he told her his notion, risen from her chair with the fury of a harpy and assailed him with the reticule that she wore at her wrist, he could not guess. As he had put his hands to his pained eye, Marguerite had opened the doors.

“You had best see to your master,” she had instructed Linden. “He may be blind. But first, I need to leave. You will procure me a hackney cab.”

Linden, to his credit, had managed both tasks with a minimum of delay. Now that the moment of crisis had passed—Marguerite had departed, St. John was not blinded—he stood over his master, who was reclining on the couch with a cut of meat over his eye, studying him.

“I suppose,” he began, “you have already begun to consider how you may mend this breach.”

“How I may mend it? I am the injured one.”

“Perhaps. She appeared to be genuinely shaken when she took her leave. As she is your father’s wife, I would advise some gesture of contrition.”

“She will not speak of this to my father,” St. John said. Somehow, his intuition told him that this day’s conversation would remain entombed in Marguerite’s memory. She would not forget it, which meant that she would not forgive it, but she would not proclaim it, either. She was, he realized, too proud. But how had he offended?

“My lord,” Linden started to speak, then paused.

“Proceed, Linden,” St. John said wearily. “You will not rest until you have spoken.”

“Did you insult Her Ladyship?”

“My conversation did not concern Her Ladyship.”

“Who, then?”

There was no use in keeping a secret from Linden. “I merely

suggested that if her protégé were seeking a protector, I would be happy to serve in that role.”

“Protector—you mean you asked her to arrange for Nell Dorchester to become your mistress?”

“It merely seems that I would suit better than the Prince Regent, would I not? He is older and vain and besides, he is fickle.”

“He is also the heir to the throne. If she wanted a lover, she might want one with a crown. Does she want a lover?”

“He has been seen in her company. Why else would a royal prince be seen in the company of a young actress?”

Linden agreed that this was a puzzle. “As to that, I cannot guess. But, if I might, my lord . . .”

“Yes?”

“You do not spend enough time in London.”

“What the devil has that to do with anything?”

“You will pardon my presumption, my lord, but it strikes me that by bringing your suggestion to Lady Bennington, you might have given the impression that you regard her as . . . well, not to put too fine a point on it, my lord, as a procurer. If she has a genuine affection for Miss Dorchester, she would have been deeply insulted by your words.”

“What has that to do with the amount of time I spend in London?”

“In London, my lord, actors are their own sort of royalty. I know that they are regarded with less than respect, but they are a realm unto themselves. We go to see them perform, just as we gather along the streets when there is a royal procession. We deliver flowers and our adoration. We cherish them. They are used to affection, not contempt.”

“I was not contemptuous. I think Miss Dorchester is a lovely, clever, admirable young woman.”

“But you have never seen her perform. On the stage, an actress overlooks her kingdom and accepts the reverence of her subjects.

You made this offer to Lady Bennington as if Miss Dorchester were no more than a common trull."

"I never said anything so base!"

Linden held up a hand of caution. "You have not paid court, my lord, to the stage where she rules."

"This is a lot of nonsense, Linden. You are suggesting that I would have done better in my suit had I first gone to see Miss Dorchester perform on stage? I fail to see what one has to do with the other."

"Yes, I—" Linden, hearing the sound of a knock at the front door, turned.

"I am not at home," St. John instructed.

"Very well, sir."

Linden closed the doors to the dining room behind him.

St. John adjusted the cutlet which was intended to mend his bruised eye. He would be obliged to remain at home until the eye had healed; to go out so marred would excite comment and speculation, past times at which Londoners excelled.

Perhaps he should return to the country. Elizabeth had not yet begun the round of balls and outings which would require him as an escort. He could return home and put this humiliating episode behind him. When his eye was restored to its normal hue, he could return.

Was Linden accurate in his assessment that it was because St. John spent so little time in London that he had severely miscalculated the reaction that would result from his offer? Actresses as royalty, indeed. What a ridiculous concept. He did not frequent theatres or gambling hells, those were the locations of his father's perdition and St. John had spent his entire life determined that he would not fall prey to the weaknesses of Lord Bennington.

He had accomplished this with some success, he thought. The estate was well managed, the Bennington finances were sound; he thought that in a year or two, he would stand for Parliament. Eventually, he would marry. One must, of course. Love was not a perquisite for marriage. A man married so that he would have children to carry

on his name.

Unbidden, the image of Nell Dorchester raising her hat to him, yesterday morning on Rotten Row, rose to his mind. The utter perfection of her features matched with the male attire, fused together by her mischievous expression and the remarkable intelligence in her countenance. She was unlike any female he had ever met. She was astute in a manner that he had never ascribed to her sex. She practiced no guile; instead, she was almost alarmingly honest. The man to whom she pledged her affection would never be bored in her company. Nor would he ever be tempted to look elsewhere, for where would he find a woman so captivating?

If only she were suitable, St. John thought. A member of the aristocracy could not marry an actress. Yes, his father had, but his father had always bent the customs of society to suit his own proclivities. He had not lived, as St. John sought to do, within the boundaries of accepted conduct. Lord Bennington had no aspirations but to please himself. He had married an actress with not a consideration or a care of how the beau monde would respond.

St. John did not care about the rakes and mistresses, the ambitious mammas and the coy debutantes of the ton reacted. But he did care about the broader strata of English society. He did not seek to offend the virtuous or the honorable; indeed, it had always been his aim to earn their admiration.

To what end? Politics, that was an ambition that he sought to achieve. But what then? To pass laws and enact legislation which preserved England as it was, or to lay the foundations for a better, stronger England, an Empire which would rule its realm with justice and tolerance?

Was he fit for such a desire when he had considered Nell Dorchester in the light of a potential mistress and not as a suitable wife?

“Linden! Saddle my horse. I am going to my father’s house!”

An Evening's Performance

But no one was at his father's house when Billings admitted him.

"Are you sure, Billings?" St. John demanded. Perhaps Marguerite had told Billings to say that no one was at home, part of her retaliation against his words earlier.

"Sir?" Billings inquired, clearly offended at the implication that he was lying. "You may see for yourself, if you choose. Lady Elizabeth has been invited to go to Vauxhall Gardens with Lady Merrick and her daughters. Lord Bennington is at his club. Lady Bennington and Miss Dorchester were going to the theatre."

"So early?"

"I believe they are in rehearsals for a new play that will be put on when this current one has ended its run."

St. John was surprised that Billings spoke so equably of the household's theatrical interests. He would have expected the stern-visaged butler to disapprove of such pursuits.

"I see. Are they expected back before night?"

"No, my lord." Billings tried not to stare at St. John's bruised eye, which was devoid of its carnivorous bandage and so entirely visible in all its rapidly expanding color. "I beg your pardon, my lord, but perhaps Dr. Mayfield—"

"There is no cure for a black eye," St. John interrupted. "It must mend on its own."

"I believe that Lord Bennington favors raw beef, my lord, or at least he did in the past."

"I have already endured that cure, thank you. It seems that I must find a way to pass the time until I can go to the theatre."

“You are certainly welcome to pass the time here, my lord. I have no doubt that your father and Lady Bennington would wish for you to do so.”

Why not? No one was at home. He could not go to his club to be greeted by the raillery that would ensue at the sight of his eye.

“Thank you, Billings. I shall do that. I shall go to Father’s library. I imagine that it remains virtually unused.”

“Miss Dorchester goes there, my lord. I believe she is fond of histories.”

“Histories? An unusual choice for a young woman. I should have thought she preferred novels.”

“She is a most unusual young woman, my lord. I shall bring you a pot of tea.”

The library was as he remembered it. A room filled with furniture that had not been replaced in generations. Family portraits upon the walls reacquainted him with his unsmiling ancestors. Books which had not been opened or read since, most likely, he had left the house for his own residence.

Histories. Unusual, to be sure. He roamed along the shelves to search for them. The shelves were free of dust, indicating that even if the room itself was only used by Miss Dorchester, the contents were still cared for by the servants. He noted that books had been moved from their accustomed place. Before, the books were placed wherever there was room, but someone had sought to organize them. He found the histories on a shelf together. That would not have been the work of Elizabeth; her tastes ran to music, not literature. Marguerite? Perhaps. But he guessed that Miss Dorchester had done it. Such a task indicated a woman who valued the company of books. Where had that attribute been nurtured? Had she been educated beyond the customary skills of reading and writing?

He knew almost nothing about her, and what he did know—her profession, the interest of the Prince Regent—did not bring him comfort. What should he do?

He thanked Billings for the tea and sat down to read one of the

histories which, by its placement amongst the others, indicated that it had been taken out. Had she been reading Herodotus? He did not know of any other woman who had done so. And, except for his late uncle, he knew of no gentlemen except himself who read the Greek historian by preference.

Returning to the pages of Herodotus reminded him of the time he had spent in his uncle's company. As he read, he found himself lost to time. His tea turned cold. He covered his eye with his handkerchief and read with his good eye.

Sometime in the afternoon, Billings returned with a tray and a fresh pot of tea. Silently, he deposited the tray on the desk and left. Absently, St. John ate bread and cheese and continued reading.

He was surprised at how quickly the time went by. He decided that he would go to the theatre from here rather than returning to his house to change. He was not dressed for the evening, but that didn't seem to matter.

"Sinjin!" his father greeted him when St. John entered the box. "I am delighted that you have taken me up on my invitation. You shall see Marguerite perform."

"Yes."

"My boy, what on earth has happened to your eye? You have not been brawling?"

"No. I offended a lady without intending to and she dealt me the requisite punishment."

"You? Offended a lady? I find that hard to believe. You have always had the most chivalric manner when in the company of the fair sex."

"Apparently not always. It appears that the theatre is full. I gather the play is popular?"

"Very. But they are already thinking of their next play. It is a historical play set in Athens. I believe it is a comedy."

"Oh? Aristophanes, perhaps?"

Lord Bennington leaned closer. "It is an original play," he

whispered.

“Who is the playwright?”

“You must not reveal the name. Original plays by unknown playwrights are, Marguerite tells me, viewed with initial suspicion and she is most anxious that this one will be well received. The playwright is our own Nell.”

“Miss Dorchester is a playwright?” St. John responded.

“Shhh, it must not be announced. She is very talented. She has had a most unique life. She grew up in an orphanage but she is very well educated. Marguerite knew her since Nell’s childhood and visited her regularly.”

Was Marguerite Nell’s mother? Had she “visited” Nell in the orphanage in order to maintain a semblance of propriety rather than allow the world to guess her secret?

His father was continuing to talk. “And when Nell turned fifteen, Marguerite took her from the orphanage and into her own home. Is that not a marvelous thing to do—the Prince Regent!”

“Where?”

“Entering the royal box. As if no one would notice his arrival,” Lord Bennington said disparagingly. “He comes to the theater in disguise, but sits in the royal box. You can see that all eyes follow him, yet see how he hides behind the curtains. He is here to see Nell, you may be sure. I do not trust his intentions. Marguerite tells me that I have no reason to fear, but she is an innocent woman with no reckoning of the world in which men rule.”

St. John doubted that Marguerite was an innocent, but he appreciated his father’s view of the Prince Regent’s intentions.

“Perhaps we should guard Miss Dorchester from his pursuit.”

“A capital idea, my boy. How should we do that?”

“Why not, at the close of the play, make our way to her dressing room. The Prince Regent will not press his advances upon her in our company. He would not like to be seen at a disadvantage.”

“Excellent!”

With their plan waiting, St. John was able to concentrate on the play, waiting for Nell to make her appearance. She did so, in men’s attire, to the applause of the audience. Her acting was effortless and natural with no histrionic dialogue; in fact, he was struck by the mesmerizing way that she spoke her lines as if she were engaged in actual conversation.

Her role was a side plot and she was not on the stage often. Marguerite, on the other hand, was the main character. St. John recognized her as a woman skilled in the art of summoning the audience’s empathy, moving them with her words and motions. His father, although he had seen the play many times, leaned forward so that he would not miss a single syllable or gesture. At one point, when Marguerite was bidding her lover adieu, she sent a kiss, with a wave of her hand, in the direction of Lord Bennington.

“She does that every night that I am in attendance,” Lord Bennington whispered.

“Is she not endearing?”

“No doubt. How soon until the play ends?”

He was eager to go to Miss Dorchester’s dressing room, even though he had no idea what he would say to her when he arrived. He glanced up at the royal box. It was empty!

“Father! The prince has left.”

The Prince Regent's Intentions

"Hm? Left? But the play has not finished."

"Let us leave now so that we may reach the dressing room before him."

"But the play is not—"

St. John was already out of his seat. Lord Bennington followed, with several glances back to the stage, where another scene had begun, one of the few which did not include his wife.

Familiar with the layout of the theatre, Lord Bennington led the way backstage. "This way," he said quietly. "The dressing rooms are back here."

His was a familiar face to the members of the acting troupe who worked behind the scenes and they greeted him with a familiarity that surprised St. John. His father did not appear to be offended in the least by their casual address.

"Here," he said. "We shall wait here for her. But what shall we do when the Prince—"

Too late. Prince George, heir to the British throne, approached the door, flanked by two men who looked, by their appearance, as if they were more bodyguards than servants. His face showed displeasure.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Waiting for Miss Dorchester," St. John answered.

The Prince's years showed. Was he wearing cosmetics, St. John wondered. His cheeks looked rather unnaturally rosy. He would have to ask Linden; Linden would know, even if he had not seen for himself. He moved with the bulk of a man who was dressed in clothing too tight to allow for comfortable mobility. But he was

royal and his features exposed a regal countenance.

"I am here to see Miss Dorchester," he said, moving forward as if he would enter her dressing room.

"Your Majesty," Lord Bennington said, "Miss Dorchester lives with my wife, Lady Bennington and me. We intend no disrespect to her, or to you."

"I am glad to hear of it, Lord Bennington. I am—"

Movement swirled around them as, the play having ended, the actors went to their dressing rooms, Marguerite among them.

She curtsied when she saw the Prince. Mollified, the Prince Regent extended his hand to raise her to her feet. "Lady Bennington," he said, kissing her hand, "it was, as always, a delight to see you perform."

"Your praise, Your Majesty, is akin to a dozen ovations," she replied. "You know my husband, Lord Bennington, and his son, St. John. My stepson is seldom in London, but we are glad to have him with us."

"They are reluctant to allow me to enter," the Prince Regent complained. "I am eager to compliment Miss Dorchester on her performance."

St. John could hardly bear to hear such hypocrisy. "Is that your only intention?" he demanded.

"St. John," Lord Bennington cautioned, placing a warning hand on his son's arm.

"That is none of your business!" the Prince retorted. "How dare you speak thus to me, your monarch. What is the matter with your eye?"

St. John avoided looking at Marguerite. "An accident," he replied. "Entirely my fault."

"With your present conduct as an indication, I have no doubt that the accident was your fault. You will be pleased to move from the door so that I may enter. Miss Dorchester is expecting me."

"I will not move from the door!" St. John exclaimed.

The actors milling about backstage looked over at the sound of the raised voice.

"You will not speak this way to me, you unmannered puppy!" shouted Prince George. "I will see you brought before the magistrate for this! You have no right to be here."

"I am here to offer Miss Dorchester my hand in marriage, if she will have me," St. John declared. "You are intruding upon my marriage proposal."

"Your marriage proposal?" The Prince's mouth dropped.

"Yes, marriage! She is an estimable woman and I should consider it a great honor if she would accept my hand in marriage. I should account myself the most fortunate man alive if she will do so. I do not intend to surrender her to anyone who will not prize her as I will and therefore, Your Majesty, I am here to obstruct you from your plans."

"Marriage proposal?" the Prince repeated, apparently hearing nothing else of St. John's speech.

"Marriage proposal?" echoed Lord Bennington.

"Marriage proposal . . . "Marguerite said thoughtfully as she surveyed his eye.

"Yes, a marriage proposal! I wish to---"

The dressing room door opened. Nell, still wearing her trousers, waistcoat and shirt from her last scene, stood there. Her face was wiped clean of its stage make-up. The top hat was still on her head, but strands of gold escaped from confinement to tumble to her shoulders.

Her gaze swept over the assembly in front of her door.

"Is there a problem?" she inquired in slightly ironic tones.

"This gentleman wishes to marry you," the Prince Regent said.

"If you do not mind, Your Majesty, I should prefer to do my own proposing."

St. John sank to one knee. "Miss Dorchester, although we have not had very much time to acquaint ourselves with one another, I should like permission to pay court to you with the intention of offering you an honorable proposal of marriage. I hope that you will not take my previous conduct as an indication that I regard you with anything less than the very highest esteem. I have been persuaded by a very wise woman that I have been remiss in my behavior. I wish to remedy that. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"You have my permission!" said the Prince Regent.

St. John, who was feverishly taking a ring from his finger to place upon Nell's hand, stopped abruptly. "Your permission!" he said. "What the devil has your permission to do with anything?"

"Perhaps, Your Majesty," Marguerite murmured, "we might find a less public place for this conversation to take place."

"Not at all!" the Prince proclaimed exuberantly. "I am done with secrecy and privacy. Nell is my daughter, and I wish to recognize her as such. Her mother and Lady Bennington were comrades. After Annabella died, Lady Bennington—who was then Marguerite Winslow, of course—saw to it that Nell was reared in an orphanage, but that she received the best possible education and care. I did not know what had transpired . . . time had past, you see, and . . . well, no matter now. After Marguerite became the toast of the London stage, I met her and she told me—rather peremptorily, as I recall—that Annabella had died in childbirth. The child was mine. Once informed of this event, I demanded to be kept aware of the child's progress. And after she went on the stage, I have been able to see her regularly, although I fear there are those who have misunderstood my devotion."

His daughter? The Prince Regent was Nell's father? Wrong side of the blanket, of course, but the young woman he had sought to make his mistress, and now wanted to make his wife, was actually of royal blood.

St. John raised his head. Nell was looking down upon him, an amused smile on her face. "I did tell you," she reminded him, "that there was no reason for concern."

"You also told me that I was insufferable," he recalled.

"So you were. I expect that you shall be again."

"I will endeavor not to be. You have not answered my proposal and I wish that you would, because I am beginning to get the most abominable ache in my knee."

Nell laughed. "Then rise," she said.

"Your answer?"

"I shall give it my most earnest consideration," she said.

"That does not sound like an acceptance." Was she refusing him? Had he declared himself in view of all, on bended knee, to a woman who did not want him?

"You haven't even kissed her," said the Prince Regent. "How do you expect a girl to take your proposal seriously if you don't even kiss her?"

"It would not be appropriate to kiss a girl who is not my fiancée!" St. John protested.

"Nonsense!" Lord Bennington said. "Any man worth his manhood is going to at least try to sneak a kiss from the girl he loves. If you don't, how is she to know that you mean what you say?"

Advice from a pair of reprobates. "I am not going to pay court to the woman I love with an audience."

"You are marrying an actress," Marguerite informed him. "She is not dismayed at the presence of an audience."

"But—"

Nell took his hands. "My lord," she said formally. "I would be pleased if you would kiss me to seal our bargain."

"Does that mean you will marry me?"

"That depends," she said, a merry glint in her eye.

"On?"

"On how convincingly you kiss me."

"I am not accustomed to having spectators watch while I kiss a woman!" St. John responded.

Her lips curved in that bewitching smile that captured his senses. "Try," she urged.

He put his arms around her, mindful at first that he was being watched intently by the future king of England, his father, own and the actress who was the queen of Drury Lane. He held, in his arms, a woman of such beauty and charm that, moments after their embrace began, he forgot everything but her, the softness of her lips beneath his, the slenderness of her shoulders, the tendrils of hair escaping from her top hat and, as they kissed, the rapture of her acquiescence to his ardor.

"Not badly done," the Prince said when the couple finally separated, their bodies apart but their eyes still locked together in a lingering embraces of glances. "Nell?"

"With practice," Nell said lightly, "I think we will be quite ready for a repeat performance on our wedding day."

* * *

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The Ugliest Man in London

Anyone but The Detestable!

"It is," Matilda Weldon said in the matter-of-fact tones which her friends recognized as the introduction to a master plan, "a great bother to be rich." She stared disconsolately out the window, feeling as if the glass might as well be prison bars locking her inside. That it would have been a luxurious prison, with fashionable furnishings, exquisite meals, and opulent indulgences was of no importance to twenty-one year old Matilda, an heiress several times over who had just learned that with an inheritance came constraints.

"You would not say that," reproved Abigail Wenthouse, "if your papa was a minor government official and your mama was forever bemoaning the fact that we cannot entertain properly."

"Yes, she would," replied Sophia Gilland with a fond smile. "Matilda will always say what she thinks, and she will say it most emphatically."

Nell Carstairs looked up from the sketch she was drawing. "You are quite correct, Sophia. Our Matilda will ever know her own mind and will speak it in a forthright manner. But what's amiss, Matilada? You have been quite blue since we arrived and I suspect that it's more than the dismal weather making you so."

Sighing, Matilda turned away from the window. "Two nights ago, Papa and Mama summoned me into Papa's study to discuss my 'prospects'," she told them, twisting the word so that they would know how unwelcome a topic it was. "Now that I am twenty-one, I inherit from my grandparents."

"I have always thought it most irregular that your grandparents chose to bequeath their wealth to you rather than to your father and your mother. Such would, after all, be the usual way of things."

"I'm afraid that Mama and Papa have a knack for making

themselves disagreeable and my grandparents, on both sides, simply chose to bypass them in the will. It has not improved my parents' temper, but there's plenty of money for them. However," she said meaningfully, settling onto the couch in a sprawl that cast her printed muslin dress, with its delicate floral adornments, into a cloth garden cascade of color. "They informed me last night that so much wealth is too great a burden for one as young and inexperienced as I." Here, Matilda batted her eyelashes and mimed the handling of a fan as she imitated the pose of a young lady of the ton. "They would chose my husband and, as I am now in possession of so much family wealth, I must needs marry someone in the family so that the legacy of my grandparents remains within our own blood."

Her friends greeted this disclosure with shocked expressions. They were accustomed to Matilda's independent ways. "What will you do?" asked Abigail, who could not conceive of defying her own parents but could not envision her strong-willed friend capitulating.

"More to the point," said Sophia shrewdly, "whom have they chosen for you to marry?"

Matilda signed again. "The Detestable," she answered.

"Not your cousin Everard!" Nell deduced.

"The very same. Third cousin, I believe, or so Mama assured me when I pointed out that inbreeding would produce idiot children and soil the bloodlines of which she is so protective."

"He is very handsome," Abigail said after a pause, striving to find a positive aspect of this news.

"He is ugly of soul," Matilda returned. "He dined with us last night. Afterwards, when we were at the piano, he admitted that he is only marrying me out of pity. He said that, because I am such an antidote, and plain as well, no one else is likely to seek me. Therefore, he will do me the great honor of marrying me and of course, overseeing my wealth so that I do not fritter it away on trifles."

"He never said such a thing!" Nell declared in outrage. "What manner of boor would say such a thing as that?"

"Oh, I've no fault to find with his candor," Matilda answered tranquilly. "I am very plain. I have not the allures of other young ladies. My hair, confess it, is neither brown nor blonde but a rather dull color in the middle, nothing of which a poet would write. My eyes are for seeing and not for sonnets, I admit; they are simply brown, neither lustrous nor brilliant. My nose . . . 'tis a nose. My lips are not ruby-red and I have not roses in my complexion. I am, in short, plain. It has been the great trial to Mama, who was quite a beauty in her day, and to Papa, who, lacking a son, would have relished a daughter who was a belle. Instead, they have me."

"Darling Matilda, no one who loves you as we do would ever agree to that description. You are altogether captivating!"

"Oh, Nell, you are such an advocate for me. And you are sincere, which makes it all the more meaningful."

"Nell is absolutely correct, Matilda, you have such a lively spirit and so energetic a character that no one who knows you could fail to fall under your spell," Sophia insisted.

"My Mama, who is, as you know, forever woeful at my lack of enticements for suitors, is always saying that she wishes I had more of your spirit," Abigail said.

"We must do something," Nell said. "We cannot simply allow you to marry The Detestable without making an effort on your behalf."

Matilda gave her loyal friends an affectionate smile. No one had truer allies and she knew that they would countenance her in her scheme.

"I shall need your help," she said in a conspiratorial tone. "If I am so plain and uninviting as a bride, I must find my own husband. I shall search for the ugliest man in London and I shall marry him! I am twenty-one and of age and I shall use my years to my advantage."

"Capital idea!" breathed Abigail, marveling at her friend's vigorous plan.

"It certainly solves one problem," said Sophia, who could think of several others but did not want to douse her friend's resolve.

“How shall we find the ugliest man in London?” Nell asked. “One can hardly put an advertisement in the newspaper.”

The girls giggled at this notion and entertained themselves with the vision of a queue of applicants lining up at the elegant Weldon drawing room to be pronounced sufficiently ugly of mien to qualify for the title.

“But your parents, Matilda,” Abigail brought this up after the laughter had subsided. “They will be quite horrified.”

“Oh, but I have already told them of my intentions,” Matilda assured her.

Abigail gasped. “You never did! What did they say?”

Matilda played with one of the delicate embroidered peonies upon the sash of her dress. “They did not believe me,” she said, adopting a sorrowful expression which did not match the mischief in her eyes. “They said that I am a silly chit who does not understand the gravity of marriage. I answered that I understand very well the gravity of an inheritance which gives me considerable freedom. It was not, I fear, a harmonious conversation.”

“I do not know where you find the courage to say such things, Matilda,” Abigail told her. “I am sure that if I even thought such a thing, Mama would box my ears.”

“I warrant they would very much prefer to box my ears,” Matilda agreed, “but instead, they consoled themselves by saying that I am a most ungrateful daughter. They sent me to my room after warning me that I am to do nothing which will, in any way, displease The Detestable and make him reconsider marrying me.”

“You did not call him The Detestable in front of your parents, surely!”

“Oh, but I did,” Matilda said emphatically. “I said that he is arrogant with an entirely unmerited high opinion of himself and that I would rather marry a circus dwarf than a man with such an elevated sense of self-worth. Then I went to my room, to which, if truth be told, I would have done anyway. They are engaged upon orchestrating the wedding of the season but I shall, with your assistance, procure my own husband on my own terms.”

“Of course we shall help you,” Nell replied and the other girls immediately voiced their assent. How they were to proceed with this radical plan, no one was sure, but such was their confidence in Matilda’s determination that they had no doubt that success would be theirs. Only Sophia, who knew a bit more of love than her friends, understood that matrimony was not merely a matter of obtaining a husband.

Ladies to the Rescue

The weather was perfect for a ride. Or for flight. The autumn foliage provided concealment behind an arboreal wall of trees which vied with one another for plumage. Since his hasty departure from Winchester, Lord Marcus Cromwell had taken care to spend the night in obscure inns where the patronage was, to be sure, rough and not overly concerned with cleanliness. He had spoken little and kept the brim of his hat low, the better to avoid notice should anyone ask for him. He could not be sure that such measures would bring him safely to Scotland, where he hoped to disappear for a measure of time until he had devised a way out of this perilous trap. But traveling openly as the Duke of Winchester would only bring him more quickly to his death, of that he was sure.

It was dark by the time he found an inn which was sufficiently rustic. Business was light and he had no trouble in obtaining a room to himself. After his supper was brought to him, Lord Marcus sat down to a plate of boiled potatoes and seasoned mutton and a glass of brandy and considered his options.

He could not, with any hope of credibility, go to the authorities and accuse his stepmother and half-brother of plotting to kill him so that Henry would inherit the dukedom. That he knew this to be true was irrelevant. Lord Marcus was aware that he had spent too much of his life in licentious living, using his title and the inheritance that his father had left him to pursue past times which, however acceptable for the beau monde, were ill-suited for prosperity.

"The arrogance of a title," Lord Marcus said to his brandy, "has cost you dearly. You squandered wealth, you neglected the Winchester estate and its tenants, you shunned your friend Hubert in favor of more glamorous and more rapacious comrades. Now you are on your own, with no one to trust and nowhere to turn."

Scotland seemed the best choice. In Scotland, he could disappear

from the London set. There were relatives on his late mother's side of the family that would, he hoped, give him shelter. He had not been a very good kinsman during the years since his mother's death. But perhaps they would show charity toward him for the sake of his mother's memory.

Lord Marcus grimaced as he thought of his gentle mother. He still remembered her, although he had been ten years old when she died. His father had been bereft at her passing, a state which made him vulnerable to the wiles of the artful Lady Grace Dubonnet, an attractive widow who had ensnared the Duke of Winchester with her sympathy at his loss. Lord Marcus had been at school when his father wrote to tell him that when he returned home for the Christmas holidays, he would find a new member of the family there to welcome him.

The welcome had been lacking in warmth. Although only twelve, Lord Marcus had sensed his stepmother's coldness and when, a year later, his half-brother Henry was born, the boy perceived an even more marked difference in Lady Grace's manner. Lord Marcus was a rival. She wanted the title and the wealth for her son.

After Oxford, and the Grand Tour, Lord Marcus had settled in London, visiting Winchester only on holidays. But those times with his father had been precious. They never spoke of the strained relationship between Marcus and his stepmother, nor did they explore the reasons why Henry was so hostile to his half-brother. Marcus was grateful, though, that he had responded when his father's solicitor wrote to tell him that the Duke was ailing and, as the heir, Lord Marcus needed to return home without delay.

The Duchess had not been pleased at his return, but she could not deny him entrance to the manor which would soon be his. He was with his father when the Duke breathed his last. He had remained for the reading of the will, which left the estate, the Winchester jewels and assets to him. Generous providence was made for his stepmother's care and for Henry's education and entrance into society, but control of the inheritance was clearly in the hands of the new duke, Lord Marcus.

He had returned to London after the funeral and it was then that the accidents began. Insignificant, at first, and seemingly

anonymous: a riding accident; a carriage race where a wheel broke; a jostling in the street that left a knife wound . . . it had taken him time to accept the preposterous notion that someone was trying to take his life. But once he acknowledged that harrowing fact, he did not have to tarry long to consider who it was who wanted him dead.

To Scotland. All he had to do was arrive there alive.

The next morning, Lord Marcus settled his bill and left the inn before the sun was fully up. Better to get an early start on his journey. It was a beautiful day in October, with a landscape that proclaimed the luster of the season. Someday soon, Lord Marcus prayed, he would be safe to enjoy such a day. But for now, he could not dally.

He heard the hooves pounding behind him and, at first, he thought nothing of it. It was a public road and daylight; why would there not be travelers? But the horses seemed to be in haste, as if they were after quarry.

He was about to turn off into the woods alongside the road when the horses pulled up to him.

“Hello, brother,” said Henry, his tone mocking.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” Lord Marcus said evenly, keeping a firm grip on the reins of his horse, wishing that he had his revolver handy.

Lord Henry’s eyebrows rose. “School? I am grieving at the death of my dearest Papa, and you would have me with books and tutors? How heartless you are, brother Marcus.”

The horsemen were encircling Marcus. He saw Henry give a nod and suddenly, they were on him, pulling him from his horse to the ground, pummeling him with their fists and, after they had covered his face with bruises, kicking him in his stomach and legs. Marcus resisted as much as he was able, but there were too many assailants for him to be able to defend himself and retaliate as well. His body fell limp against the hard-packed soil of the path and he thought, wonderingly, that surely someone would find his body before nightfall. He would not wish to make a supper for the creatures

who dined nocturnally.

"All right, lads," Henry said. "The coup de grace is on me."

He dismounted from his horse, knife held high in his hands as he surveyed his half-brother's recumbent form. "So, brother, I hope that you enjoyed your brief time as the Duke of Winchester," Henry cackled. "I am certain that I shall do much better---what the devil is that? Demme, someone is shooting at us! To horse, lads, and quickly, before the watch is summoned!"

The men rode off to the accompaniment of bullets. Marcus was dimly aware of the sound of galloping, and then a brief respite, until more galloping of horses came nearer. Were they back? He hoped that they would simply kill him quickly. His body ached and he could not open his eyes. His tongue, probing the wall of his swollen lips, revealed that he was minus his two front teeth. His throat felt strangely stricken, as if he could not make words to come forth.

He thought that his hearing must be impaired as well, because when the galloping ceased and the horses drew near, he smelled fragrances and he heard female voices.

"Well done, Matilda, I do believe you shot off the blackguard's hat!"

"I've been practicing, but shooting at a moving target is much more entertaining than aiming at leaves on tree branches. Whatever they were up to, it was not to anyone's welfare."

"This man was what they were up to," another voice said grimly. "We may have reached him just in time. He looks near-death."

"In truth," said another voice. "He looks very much as if he might be the ugliest man alive. You have found your bridegroom, Matilda."

Marcus tried to protest, but the thoughts in his head did not translate into words. It made no sense. Ugly? He was, or had been, accounted something of a beau in London. Bridegroom? He was in no condition for nuptials, and what sort of female would . . .

Before he could finish the thought, he drifted into unconsciousness. He knew that he was not dead yet, but he was not at all sure that he

would be alive for long, regardless of what preposterous plans his rescuers seemed to have for him.

Help From Aunt Gretchen

Matilda was confident that Aunt Gretchen would come to their aid. The others were less confident.

“She is your favorite aunt, and you her only niece, Matilda, but will she not be obliged to tell your parents of what you plan to do?”

“Aunt Gretchen has always done what she wanted. She is the scandal of the family. Grandfather cut her off when she went off to Rome without a chaperone and became an artist’s model. It was then that she discovered her own artistic talent, so she came back to England and has made quite a nice living for herself as an artist. I do not know if she returned to England in a state of virtue, but her income has not suffered as a result. She will help us, I know she will. And as we are nearly to Daventry, as we planned, of course we will stop.”

“We cannot leave this gentleman in the road to die of his wounds,” Nell protested.

“Certainly not,” Matilda affirmed. “We shall have to lift him and throw him over the horse and lead him.”

“I do not see how we can lift him,” Abigail said dubiously. “He looks to be quite tall.”

“There are four of us,” Matilda said impatiently. “Of course we shall be able to lift him.”

If the effort to raise the gentleman required rather more effort than Matilda had predicted—Abigail was correct in her assessment of his height—they were able, nonetheless, to accomplish their task.

“I fear that he will have a dreadful headache when he comes to,” Nell said worriedly. “I wonder if it is quite safe to move him.”

“Safer to move him than to leave him for the night,” Matilda said.

"We shall ride at a slow pace so as not to jostle him. Nell and Abigail, can ride on that side of him; Sophia and I shall ride on this side. Nell, if you take the reins, I believe he shall manage well enough. He's quite balanced on the horse," she noted with satisfaction. "He'll not slide off, at any rate. 'Tis fortunate that he is so tall."

"A pity he is so ugly," Abigail said.

"Not a bit of it," Matilda declared. "He's quite ugly enough to marry."

Despite the gravity of the situation—four young maidens who had warded off the attackers that threatened the life of a man who was a stranger to them—the girls began to laugh.

"Matilda, you never lose sight of your aims," Sophia said, still laughing. "I can only ponder what your Aunt Gretchen will say."

Aunt Gretchen was not in the least nonplussed by the news that her niece had brought a wounded gentleman with them. She directed her servants to bring him inside and see to his wounds.

"Now then, m'dear," she said when the unconscious man had been delivered to a bedchamber and the four girls were enjoying a luncheon of cheese and bread and fruit in her drawing room, "I believe that explanations are due."

"I am not sure where to begin."

"I am done painting for the day," Gretchen Weldon said in a tone of voice that indicated that she would not be put off. "I have the remainder of the day, and into the night as well, if need be. You are staying the night, I assume? Are your parents aware of this, or should I send a message to them?"

"Darling Aunt Gretchen, you know how impossible Mama and Papa can be," Matilda commenced.

"I do, but that does not answer my question. Do your parents—and yours, ladies—know that you are here?"

"I told Mrs. Endicott that I was going to visit you and that Sophia, Abigail, and Nell were going as well. Mama and Papa will ask her where I am and she will tell them."

"My parents know," Abigail said anxiously. "But they will expect me to come home if they learn of this."

"Oh, Nabby," Matilda said. "How can you go home when we are about to have an adventure."

Gretchen rose. She was still attired in her painting wardrobe, which consisted of a gentleman's shirt worn outside a long, plain skirt which bore the evidence of her profession with daubs of paint upon it. Around her hair was a turban, to keep the unmanageable brown locks safe from the palette. "I shall send Peter to the village with a note and he shall inform your parents that you are going to spend several days here."

Abigail did not conceal her unease. "I am not sure that they will approve," she said. "They are dreadfully straitlaced."

"Then do not tell them," Matilda suggested. "Let them think that you are still at my home with me."

"I could not lie!"

"I shall take care of it," Gretchen said. She fixed her niece with a stern glance. "You're in a pickle, young lady and I insist on hearing every detail."

After sending Peter on his way with a message to the girls' parents, Gretchen returned to the dining room, poured herself a cup of tea, and sat down. "Now then. Who is the gentleman you brought with you, why is he in such a precarious condition, and what do you intend to do with him?"

Matilda met her aunt's discerning gaze without faltering. "I do not know who he is," she replied. "Nor do I know why he was under such fierce attack by a gang of thugs. But I am going to marry him."

By the conclusion of her niece's explanation, Gretchen had reached her decision. 'You are of age,' she said firmly. "You know absolutely nothing of the world, but neither did I when I went to Italy and I was not much older than you are now. You do, however, know yourself and that will prove to be a most effective armor for whatever life may cast upon you. I cannot say that I approve of what you are doing . . . but I understand why you are doing it. I loathe this primitive habit of parents telling their daughters what

man they may and may not marry. I would not allow a daughter of mine to marry Everard Weldon; he is a puffed-up popinjay with no more sense than a peacock feather and the very idea that he would marry you as a favor is insulting. If I were a man, I'd call him out for that remark. I'd call him out anyway, but he would not answer my challenge and there's no sense in expending energy where it will come to naught. I will help you."

Matilda flung herself at her aunt. "I knew you would be sporting about this, Aunt Gretchen, I just knew it!"

"Yes, well, I've done my sporting and I have no regrets. You know what you are about, and you'll have your grandparents' inheritance so that you may do as you please. You must go to Gretna Green."

Abigail gasped and went pale. "You mean, elope?" she questioned, her voice quavering.

"Certainly. There, with coin in hand, you shall find someone who will ask no questions."

"But her reputation," Abigail continued and even the other girls looked a trifle uneasy at this solution.

"Her reputation will be lost in any case, and can only be gained back if she is married," Gretchen said briskly. "Society will forgive a married woman things which it will not tolerate in a spinster. You may take my word on that. You will stay here the night; your gentleman will benefit from a night's rest in a bed with his wounds dressed and tended to. Tomorrow, my driver will take you to Gretna Green in my carriage. Your gentleman—you do know that you will need to have a name in order to marry him, I trust—will manage the journey in a carriage but I doubt if he could sit a horse for five minutes without toppling from the saddle. What will you do after the wedding?"

Matilda's planning had not gotten that far. "I . . . we will be married."

"Yes, and where will you live?"

"She will come to stay with me," Sophia said decisively. "We've plenty of room in the London house and we were all planning to spend the autumn together anyway."

“Excellent,” Gretchen said. “You will, of course, be circumspect regarding your own roles in this escapade. I assume you all wish to marry at some point?”

The girls nodded.

“Of course. Then you will say nothing of your participation in the elopement. Else you risk your own chances of successful matrimony.”

“Oh, we have made a pledge not to marry until we all have found prospective husbands.”

“I trust you do not intend to obtain your husbands in the same manner as my niece?” Gretchen inquired drily. “I believe you will find that there are easier ways to do so.”

Gretna Green

Matilda had concocted a tale of thwarted romance which she was convinced would sway the hardest of hearts to marry them, even if the groom was unable to respond to his vows or even stand unassisted for very long. She had a flair for storytelling, her aunt acknowledged, commenting that only Drury Lane could have done justice to such drama. However, Gretchen put more trust in money and she handed her niece a plump purse filled with coins.

“Bribery will get you what fancy will not,” she said. “Do not be so enamored of your tale-telling that you fail to be practical. There are enough of you to give your story a very bare semblance of authenticity, not that I believe the residents of Gretna Green are much troubled by the details of the nuptials they witness. Now, on your way. My driver will see that you are well cared for; leave everything to him. After you are wed, you will take my coach and go straight to London. Thomas will see you safely there. You may send word to your parents once you are there, if you choose to tell them that you are wed, or you may simply tell them that you are in London with Sophia. They will not like it . . . but if they intend to marry you off to The Detestable, then it does not matter whether they like it or not. Send word to me once you are safely in London and I will notify your parents that you have left my home. What will you do for your wardrobe?”

“Our trunks are already at Sophia’s London house,” Nell explained. “We made our plans to spend October and November with her and we will return home for Christmas.”

“My parents are expecting us,” Sophia assured Gretchen.

Gretchen refrained from commenting that they were not expecting a husband for Matilda. The girls had a strong and loyal friendship and who was to say, she thought as she returned to her studio after seeing the carriage depart, whether, in the long run, they might

make better marriages because of their firm bonds?

The gentleman, his wounds dressed and bandaged, sat slumped in the carriage. Aunt Gretchen's footman had done as good a job as possible of bathing and dressing him, but it was impossible to shave him, due to the severity of the swelling in his face. If possible, he appeared to be even uglier today than he had when they first came upon him. His bruises were turning purple; his eyes were swollen shut; his lips were outsize from the swelling; there were marks around his throat where one of the assailants had attempted to strangle him. However, the servants had found a change of clothing among his possessions and he was at least attired respectably, which was a blessing, Gretchen said, as the clothing he had been wearing was rent beyond repair. The signet ring on his finger would serve as a wedding ring, she had observed, although it would not fit Matilda's small fingers. Matilda would have to purchase a wedding ring on her own, Gretchen decided. She would have to do a lot on her own; her husband-to-be seemed as if it would be some time before he could even walk without assistance, so dreadful was the beating that had been inflicted upon him.

The coachman stopped to rest the horses and to procure lunch for the ladies and himself at mid-day. "We're about two hours or so from the Scottish border," he told them. "We'll go into the village and then you'll be marrying this gentleman."

"Very good, Thomas," Matilda said, "and thank you for bringing us our lunch. I think we should like to walk a bit before we set off again. I'm feeling rather stiff and sore."

"What about him?" Thomas inquired of the sleeping gentleman who was about to become a bridegroom within a short expanse of time.

"It will be hard enough to get him out of the carriage," Matilda said, "when we are obliged to do so. We shall leave him in here for the nonce, I think."

"Best if you don't go too far from the carriage, miss," Thomas advised. "Never telling what sort of clientele this place might have. What with all these marriages swooping over the border, there could be any sort of villainy afoot."

"I suppose your aunt told him to look after us?" Nell inquired as

they began their stroll in the yard of the inn, moving out of the way more than once as horses burst into the enclosure or more carriages arrived.

“Very likely, but Thomas would do so in any case. He looks after my aunt, whether she wants him to or not. I must admit that I’m rather glad that Aunt Gretchen decided to help us.”

“So am I,” Abigail agreed fervently. Having an adult’s authorization, even such a one as the radical Gretchen Weldon, would give her something to offer as an explanation to her parents. Or perhaps Matilda would think of something, Abigail considered. Matilda was so very good at thinking of things.

Thomas’ assistance proved to be valuable once they crossed the Scottish border from Carlisle and were in Gretna Green. He seemed to be a font of knowledge on the matter of how to get married in Scotland.

“You see,” he explained to Matilda as he supported the rather unwieldy burden of her bridegroom, his arm around the gentleman’s waist to keep him standing, “folks think that it’s only because the Scots will let youth marry at ages fourteen for the lads and twelve for the lasses. But it wasn’t until the toll road was build, back in the ‘70s, making it nothing at all to cross the border, that couples such as yourself began flocking here.”

“I see . . . er, where do we go to marry?”

“Oh, anywhere you like. Scottish law says that as long as there are two witnesses to the ceremony, anyone can marry you.”

“Anyone?” Sophia repeated.

“Oh, aye. The blacksmiths are famous for it.”

“Blacksmiths?”

“Aye. We’ll head off in that direction. Anvil priests, they call them.”

“And the marriage will be lawful?”

“Aye,” Thomas said cheerfully. “You’ll be wedded to this gentleman. What’s his name?”

"I don't know . . . I mean . . ."

"Can't marry a chap who doesn't have a name. Did you think to check his pockets?"

"Of course not!" Abigail replied, aghast at the impropriety of such a notion.

Thomas, his eyes twinkling, said, "You'd best come up with a name."

"Oh, if they are so lax as to letting blacksmiths perform the wedding, perhaps they shall not quibble over a trivial matter such as names."

And, as odd as it seemed to the girls, Matilda was correct. She spun such a fanciful tale that the blacksmith declared he would be honored to officiate at the wedding of such a star-crossed pair, destined to be together despite the disapproval of her parents. What sort of parents, he intoned, would go to such lengths to keep lovers apart? He didn't hold with violence, he told Matilda as he pocketed the guineas she handed to him from the purse her aunt had provided.

It was singularly odd, Matilda thought that night as she and her friends slept in the room that Thomas had procured for them at an inn on the English side of the border. Thomas and the gentleman to whom she was now wed were in another room. She was a married woman. She had no idea to whom she was married. His clothing was well made, indicating that he had an excellent tailor. He had been riding an impressive looking horse who was now recovering from his hard ride in Aunt Gretchen's stable. He was tall and appeared to be well-formed, from what little she could judge of his appearance. He looked to be somewhere in his late twenties or early thirties, but there was no way to be certain, as his appearance was still too marred by his bruises and wounds to reveal his features. He had a fine head of thick black hair in a cut favored by the dandies of the beau monde.

She had accomplished her aim, just as she had threatened to do. Her parents would be irate, Matilda realized with a satisfied smile as she considered their reaction. The Detestable would be infuriated to see her anticipated fortune disappear before he had a chance to

lay his hands on so much as a farthing of it. But the deed was done and it could not be undone. By the time she and her husband were safely ensconced at the home of Sophia's parents, she would have spent sufficient time in matrimonial intimacy that her mother and father would assume that she was beyond their power to amend.

Her friends would keep her secret. It remained to be seen what the gentleman would think when he was well enough to discover that in the process of being saved from an attack on the road, he had acquired a wife.

Recovering in London

By the time they arrived in London, Sophia's parents had departed for the country, leaving Sophia's Aunt Griselda in charge of the household. Griselda Langley was a cheerful widow of some fifty years who was sympathetic when she learned of the terrible fate that had befallen Matilda's husband.

"I don't know what your parents will say when they find out that you eloped, dear," she said, "but if you love him and he loves you, it will all come out all right. I'll have the footmen take him upstairs and put him straight to bed. Really, there's no safety at all these days. No wonder that Sir Robert Peel is determined to do something about it. To think of this gentleman being attacked on the road in such a manner. We ought to have the army over here instead of over in France, I say. He'll need a physician, I shouldn't wonder, and . . . dear me, he looks quite . . . quite . . ."

"Now, Aunt Griselda," Sophia broke in, "you do know that love is in the heart and not in the eyes."

"Of course, of course," Griselda said, collecting herself. "And I'm sure he has a noble heart. How did you meet him? I shall go and fetch the footmen straightaway before he falls over."

Matilda had not considered this. Consternation showed in her face. "How did I meet him?" she asked in a hurried whisper, anxious for a response before Griselda returned.

"The two of you were meeting secretly and when your parents found out, they forbade you to see him and arranged your marriage with your detestable distant cousin, who is only interested in your fortune," Nell provided. "Your beloved was so incensed at the notion that he wanted to marry right away. Hence, with the blessing of your aunt, you were off to Gretna Green. That's more or less the story you've concocted, minus the flourishes."

“Yes, but it doesn’t tell how we---“

“There, that’s taken care of. Rest will do him wonders and I’ve sent for Dr. Loring to come round later today and have a look at him. I’m sure he won’t be nearly so . . . so . . . purple,” she smiled with relief at the diplomatic phrasing, “once he’s healed from his wounds. Now, you girls should go upstairs and freshen up. Your trunks arrived and the maids have already unpacked your things. I’ll have the kitchen send up refreshment.”

“I ought to make sure that my beloved gets something,” Matilda said, mindful of her duties as a married woman even if she was not quite certain how to accomplish them. “Perhaps some beef tea would help him.”

“The very thing,” Griselda, clapping her hands appreciatively. It could not help his abominable looks, she thought privately, but it might make him less . . . less funeral.

“I shall also need to make an appointment to see my solicitor,” Matilda said. “I must make arrangements to have my finances settled in a bank of my choice.”

“Very good, dear. I shall accompany you to that appointment, as your husband is quite unable to do so at the moment. Or for some time, I fear.”

“And I shall require the services of a dentist,” Matilda continued. “To cast molds for his missing front teeth.”

“Yes . . . that will help. Now, you let the gentleman sleep while you eat something. Then, after he has had his rest, you will be able to take care of him.”

For Marcus, the days had been a blur. He could recall vividly the pain inflicted by his half-brother and the accomplices who had cornered him and attacked him, until he was rescued. But then matters became decidedly less certain. He would have sworn an oath that his rescuers were females, but that was impossible, of course; females would hardly fire weapons at a gang of marauders. Then he remembered a journey, and a carriage, and leaning against someone while he promised something to someone. Then a longer carriage ride and finally, blissfully, he was in bed in a quiet room.

He heard the door open and the sound of skirts rustling as a woman approached the bed. He tried, but failed to open his eyes. Courtesy seemed to require some sort of acknowledgement, but he was quite unable to speak; his throat felt as if there were a terrible pressure against it that precluded speech.

“Sit still,” said a young woman’s voice. “You’ve had rather a busy time of it and now we must see that you mend. The doctor will come later this afternoon and take a look at you, but you wasn’t worry. Aunt Gretchen believes that you are made of strong mettle and that you will be well, and she is never wrong about such things.”

Aunt Gretchen? Who the devil was Aunt Gretchen? He made a sound, but was embarrassed when it bore no resemblance to human utterance.

“I’m afraid that those vile creatures wounded you all about your head and neck,” the woman said sympathetically. “I believe they meant to kill you. When you are better, we shall look into the matter. Such monsters should not be allowed out, clearly.”

Henry. But Henry would not have done this on his own. The Duchess—the Dowager Duchess she was now—must have been involved somehow. What were they thinking now? Did they assume that he had died of the wounds, or were they awaiting a chance to renew their murderous efforts? There was some grim satisfaction to be taken from the fact that, if he had no idea where he was or whom he was with, neither would they know. Of course, if he disappeared, what would happen to the title?

He felt the brush of a woman’s silken sleeve brush against his cheek. The fragrance of something floral accompanied the fabric. The voice was low in pitch, with warm, comfortable tones that, he suspected, in better times would invoke humor.

He felt the pillow raise behind his head. The strain of the posture was not pleasant, but then a cup was raised to his lips and a warm liquid entered his mouth. He almost felt restored by its warmth.

“That’s very good,” the woman encouraged. “Have another sip. We’ll do this slowly; I don’t think you can swallow very easily, can you? Never mind, don’t try to speak. You must be in a great deal of

pain. Aunt Gretchen gave you a bit of laudanum and that helped, I am sure. Dr. Loring will give you a bit more, just to help with the pain. When you are well, we shall go to the authorities and see if those vicious brutes may be apprehended. I should very much like to see them end up in prison for what they've done."

Marcus felt that he would prefer to return the actions which Henry had inflicted upon him. One could not, as a duke, send one's half-brother to the gallows; one had to find less public ways of taking care of the matter. But for the time being, he was incapable of doing much of anything except reclining in this bed, while a solicitous angel who smelled of honeysuckle and wore soft silk ministered to him.

Perhaps he was dead and this was heaven, and an angel was at his side. He doubted that, with the life he had led, heaven wouldn't be his destination, but perhaps God had taken pity upon him.

"Poor man," he heard the woman say in a quiet voice, almost a whisper. The cup of tea was taken away. He felt blankets pulled up close to keep him warm. The fire in the room was blissfully blazing, taking out the chill of the autumn day. He didn't know where he was, but he felt safe and, strangely, he felt as if he were at home. That was ludicrous, certainly; home was Winchester Hall. No, home was London. But he was supposed to be in Scotland, out of sight, until he could decide what to do about his stepmother and half-brother and their designs upon his inheritance. But Henry had struck him, and then he had been rescued by girls.

"Rest," the voice said. "You've had a dreadful time of it and there is much to explain." The woman hesitated. "But now is not the time." Was there a note of relief in her voice? "Sleep now," she said, the assurance returning. "Dr. Loring will come and he will prescribe something to make you better. I shall sit here at your side while you rest. You are quite at home here, so you have nothing to fear."

There was something amusing in the thought that he had nothing to fear when he was unaware of his surroundings or his location, and another thought pushed at his mind, but he could not retrieve it. Why was he safe now? Who was this woman and why had she taken him into her home? Where had he been before? It was too much to consider. He let the weight of his eyelids overrule his

curiosity and fall. Within minutes, he was asleep.

A Complicated Marriage

"You see, Dr. Loring, my husband has been beaten to the very brink of death," Matilda explained earnestly.

Dr. Alastair Loring frowned. "You should have sent word that his wounds were so severe," he scolded. "I would have come at once."

"Oh, no, we would not trouble you, that is, we tended to him and he is better. Not well, but better," Matilda said. "Will you have a cup of tea?"

"I should be seeing my patient, Mrs.---"

"Yes, of course, quite right," Matilda gave him a generous smile. "I shall take you to him. Please do not make reference to me, if you would be so kind. He is very troubled, you see, about his condition and . . . "Matilda lowered her gaze. Her embarrassment was not entirely feigned. "And his inability, given his wounds, to perform, er . . . "

"I quite understand," the doctor assured her. "I shall make no reference to you at all, should he ask."

"Oh, he won't ask," Matilda promised. "He is unable to talk.

"He is mute?"

"No, I mean . . . he cannot speak at present. One of the hooligans who attacked him tried to strangle him—you shall see the bruises around his throat when you examine him—and his speech has been affected."

"I see. You really should have sent for me sooner. It sounds rather serious."

"Yes, it is, only he is quite strong and I believe that with proper care and rest, he shall rally admirably. I simply wished to explain matters to you."

"I hope that you have contacted the authorities," the doctor said as she led the way to the bedroom where her husband slept.

"It wasn't in London," she answered. "I shall send word to the village constable, as soon as I have the time."

"My dear Mrs.---what did you say your---"

"Ahh, here we are. I shall wait right outside here for you, should you need anything. Thank you so very much, Dr. Loring, we are quite in your debt." Matilda's smile was radiant as she opened the door to admit the doctor.

As soon as the door closed behind Dr. Loring, Matilda's three friends came scurrying out of the chamber at the end of the corridor.

"I had no idea marriage could be so complicated," Matilda confessed in a whisper. "I am frantic at being asked to provide a surname. Whatever shall I call myself now that I am married?"

"You might as well continue the charade that you employed at Gretna Green when you told the blacksmith that your husband's name was Weldon Weldon," Nell said.

"I was in a panic and couldn't think of anything better," Matilda said crossly. "My own name was all that came to mind."

"It's going to make matters rather complicated after he recovers," Abigail predicted. "You won't really be married in the eyes of the law."

Sophia was not entirely certain that Matilda was legally married in the present, in any case, but saw no reason to present more obstacles when there were quite enough already. "Perhaps, once he recovers and is able to speak, he will be so enamored by your kindness that he will give you his name in earnest," she suggested.

"He is more likely to be enamored by my inheritance," Matilda replied realistically. "But at least he will not dare to make a claim upon it, as The Detestable would have done. I suppose we shall manage somehow," she said.

"Do you suppose your Aunt Gretchen has told your parents by now that you have married?" Nell asked.

Matilda shook her head. "Aunt Gretchen won't do that. For one thing, she will expect me to do it. And for another," she smiled, "she'll never give me away like that. She's far too sporting. She will tell them that I have gone on to London to stay with Sophia and they will be put out and cross and will ignore me."

The door opened and the doctor emerged, taken aback at the quartet of young ladies hovering in the corridor. He recognized Sophia.

"Ah, Miss Gilland, I hope that your parents are well?"

"Very well, thank you, Dr. Loring. My Aunt Griselda is staying with us while they are away."

Dr. Loring had been the Gilland family physician since before Sophia was born and she was as familiar to him as her comrades were not. "Your husband, madam," he said to Matilda, concealing the fact that he felt he had forgotten her surname and not wanting to reveal his inadequate memory.

"Oh, yes, Dr. Loring," Matilda said, gazing up at him with limpid brown eyes filled with gratitude. "I hope that you are able to help my poor beloved."

"I . . . yes, I believe so. You are right; he is a very hearty young man. His wounds are serious, he took a punishing from those thugs, and the law should be set upon them without delay for what they did to him. His vocal cords are injured from the grip of the person who tried to strangle him. I prescribe warm poultices on his throat, three times a day. You will see to it?"

"Certainly."

"He is bruised, as you know. Bruises heal. Miraculously, no bones appear to be broken; I was fearful that perhaps his ribs had taken injury but that is not the case. He is rather fearsome-looking with the swelling in his face, but swelling will recede in time. Youth and vigor are marvelous healing agents. I will check on him again at week's end. In the meantime, see to the poultices on his throat and feed him soft foods; swallowing will be too much for him just now. Sleep is, of course, the best medicine, and he is asleep now. Let him rest as much as he can, but gradually, he must move about or he

will become an invalid.”

“I wonder if you could recommend a dentist,” Matilda asked. “His front teeth need to be replaced and I have heard that there are ways of doing so that defy belief.”

“There are,” the doctor said, “but it is not an inexpensive proposition.”

“If it will restore my beloved,” Matilda declared, “no amount is too much.”

Considering that her husband resembled nothing so much as a grotesque empurpled simian, the doctor was impressed by her dedication. “The dentist’s name is Marcel Lefevre,” Dr. Loring said. “He is from Switzerland and very experienced in these matters. His clientele is of the most exclusive and I have heard only praise from his patients.” He provided her with the location of the dentist’s office, reminded her again of the measures to be taken to restore her husband to health, and took his leave.

The young ladies, aware that they had much to discuss that could not be shared with Sophia’s Aunt Griselda, went to the library. It was a place where Aunt Griselda, who believed that bookish women were likely to fall ill of unnamed complaints, never ventured.

“This is all very tangled,” Abigail said when they were inside the room and the door closed behind them. “We are very fortunate that your parents are away, Sophia, but what shall we do when they return?”

“Nothing at all. If Matilda is married, and owing to her husband’s condition has chosen to let him convalesce here, it is of no great significance,” Sophia said with a confidence she was far from feeling.

“They will find it very odd if Matilda has married a man whose name is unknown to her,” Nell pointed out.

“Perhaps he will be able to speak by then,” Matilda said.

“And what will he say when he can speak? That he was set upon by a gang of ruffians and rescued by four young ladies who are far more adept with firearms than any of their parents are aware, and

that, somewhere between this rescue and regaining his ability to speak, he was married? We shall have to do better than that.”

“He might fall in love with you,” Sophia suggested.

“Fall in love with me?” Matilda repeated. “What a silly notion. Why ever should he do such a thing?”

“Why not? You are a dear and we all adore you. Why shouldn’t he come to feel the same? After all, you are taking care of him, nursing him, and seeing that he has medical attention. You could have left him for dead. Yes,” Sophia said, “upon consideration, I do believe that is the very best option.”

“How long will your parents remain in the country?” Matilda inquired.

“Oh, Papa won’t miss the hunting and to be frank, he does not like London nearly as much as Mama does,” Sophia said brightly. “I expect that they will be away for the rest of the year. I shall have to return to the country for Christmas,” she said. “Aunt Griselda will return also; we have the entire family stay for Christmas. But by then, he will be better and quite in love with his angel of mercy.”

“As Matilda is a married woman,” Abigail pointed out, “she is not in need of a chaperone. She can stay here.”

“I shall need to purchase a house in London,” Matilda said. “I shall need to set up my own residence.”

“But Matilda,” Nell said, “you don’t know anything about such matters. Gentlemen do those things.”

“It cannot be so hard to do,” Matilda argued. “One needs a house, therefore one purchases one.”

“Yes, but so much is involved,” Nell said, having a vague understanding that there were matters for which males were uniquely better suited to handle. “I don’t know anyone who has purchased a house. People simply have them already.”

“I shall ask Hubert,” Sophia announced. “He will know.”

“Hubert! I thought you had sent him off after his last proposal.”

“So I did,” Sophia acknowledged. “I told him that I cannot marry him until the four of us are all married. But now that Matilda is married, we are on our way to weddings, are we not?”

“You may be, and Matilda is, but I am no nearer to the altar than Matilda’s husband is to being handsome,” Abigail said glumly. “I have nothing for a dowry except a pittance and Mama is in despair that I will not be able to attract a husband. And Nell is so very particular that she will not accept anyone who offers for her.”

Nell began to defend her stance, but Matilda waved her hands in front of them to silence the girls. “Hubert will be able to help us,” she said. “He knows gentlemen who will be delighted to pay suit to you both. Abigail needs a rich suitor and Nell needs a paragon. We shall rely on Hubert to provide both.”

Improving Under Matilda's Care

"There, is that better? I am afraid that the view is not very inspiring now that the leaves have fallen from the trees and everything looks quite bare," Matilda said, opening the curtains to let the scant daylight into view, "but there is a little bit of sunlight and it's so much better than the rain which has plagued us all week."

Marcus nodded. The young woman whose name was Matilda moved away from the window and returned to his bedside.

"Today is going to be quite an important day for you," Matilda said as she held the spoon to his lips so that he could have a sip of broth. "You are going to be shaved. Dr. Loring thinks that your swelling has gone down sufficiently so that it will not hurt you. At least," she corrected herself, "it will not hurt you so very much. Then you will feel much more yourself, will you not?"

Marcus nodded. Speech still eluded him, although the doctor had assured him that this was a temporary condition. The growth of beard on his face was itchy and irritating; he had always been clean shaven. At the prospect of a shave, Marcus brightened.

Matilda noticed his reaction. "Yes, that will make matters much better," she said as he swallowed another spoonful of soup. "And I have more good news. Dr. Loring thinks that, now that your face is healing, and now that you have front teeth again, you are up to eating more substantial food."

Marcus nodded his eagerness. No matter how Matilda tried to tempt his palate with broths, blancmange and other easily digestible offerings, he had come to loathe everything that was delivered to him by spoon.

"Nothing too demanding, of course," Matilda said, not wishing to

douse his eagerness but committed to telling the truth. "Cook is preparing a stew with bits of meat in it, and potatoes, and it will be quite delicious, I promise you. We dare not move to slices of meat until we have jumped the next hurdle."

He tried to smile at her sally, not knowing that the effect, with his bruised, multi-colored cheeks, thick growth of beard, and lumpy, swollen face, was somewhat horrifying. But Matilda had grown used to his appearance and, although she would not confess it to the others, she no longer thought him quite as ugly as she had when she first saw him.

Marcus wished that he could speak. He wanted to thank the young woman for her care of him. He did not know who she was; he did not know the names of the other young ladies, either, who occasionally stopped by to greet him and wish him well and occasionally take turns feeding him. He thought of asking for ink and paper to pose his questions, but he hesitated to do so. How could he answer the questions that they were too polite to ask him? They had taken him in and asked for nothing in return. He was living in comfort; servants saw to it that he was bathed and attired in clean clothing. Matilda, who was truly an angel, spent much of her day in his company, putting warm poultices on his throat, reading to him and making sure that he was comfortable. It was too cold now to go outside, but she would help him make his way over to the window, which she would then open briefly so that he could enjoy fresh air before the room became too chilled.

"Do you remember anything about that day?" she asked him when he had finished the broth.

He shook his head. He remembered very little, but even if he could speak, he was not about to confess that his half-brother had attempted to murder him.

It seemed to Matilda that she owed him a modicum of candor. "My friends and I were on our way to visit my aunt," she said. "We saw that you were under attack by a gang. We had our weapons with us and we began shooting. We frightened them off, I believe."

Marcus' face revealed his incredulity. Henry had been frightened off by four young ladies?

“Yes, I know,” she said, misunderstanding his expression, “it is not at all the thing for females to master firearms. But we decided to do so several years ago.” It had been after a visit from The Detestable, when he had scoffed at the notion that women could possibly make claims of being marksmen. Matilda had taken up the challenge and she and her friends had adopted the skill, practicing by shooting at branches of trees and later, by aiming at apples positioned on fences. They had achieved a level of proficiency which would have astounded The Detestable. “And I am very glad we did so,” she exclaimed, “else I am afraid that you would not have survived the attack.”

Very likely she was right. He dimly recalled the sound of female voices as his brother and his fellow attackers galloped away. He did not remember being robbed, but as the signet ring was gone from his finger, he realized that Henry must have stolen it. Much of what happened after that was lost to his memory. He could not recall anything clearly except waking up in this bedroom, which was a cheerful, well-furnished room with a warm fire in the fireplace and an excellent view of the hillside beyond the window. He had planned to hide away in Scotland to decide what to do about the danger that he faced from his father’s widow and son. Perhaps this was better, although he felt guilty for withholding his identity from his rescuers. When he knew what to do about his future, he had resolved, he would reveal his true identity to the young ladies. And perhaps, to Matilda, he would confess more.

Was he being sentimental as a result of his weakness, to find his thoughts and his gaze lingering on the young lady whose attentions he had come to look forward to? The room seemed quite empty when she was not within, but as soon as she opened the door, he felt more at home than he felt when he was at Winchester Hall. Of course, he realized, no one here appeared to be intent upon murdering him. Quite the opposite, as Matilda seemed devoted to keeping him alive. If he could only speak, it would have been easier to broach the subject. But he could not. And even if he could, what would he say to this young woman?

For all he knew, she was a private nurse, engaged to care for him. But that was unlikely. No one knew of the attack and therefore no one would have sought his wellbeing. His friends might have been

surprised by his prolonged absence, but they would have assumed he was off on some assignation or visiting friends. He was a bachelor and he answered to no one.

Matilda noticed his change of expression; the swelling had diminished enough that his features, although not distinguishable from his bruises, occasionally showed themselves. He seemed of a sudden disheartened.

“A shave,” she said briskly. “Sooner rather than later, I think. You will feel the better for it, I am sure of that. If you were female, I would suggest a new hat or a ribbon but, as you are a man, alas, I am bereft of ideas.”

He smiled. She recognized the effort rather than the intended result and patted him gently on his hand. “I will send up Louis. He is a footman, not a valet, but as he too has whiskers, I am sure that he will be able to do justice to the task. And then we shall see if you do not feel well enough to anticipate a bowl of Cook’s excellent stew.”

Louis proved to be as skilled as Matilda had promised, and gentle as well, carefully moving over the swollen promontories of Marcus’ face so that he did not inflict pain upon the still-tender flesh. Marcus, although he felt each stroke, welcomed the shave. He tried to indicate his thanks to the footman, but Louis merely nodded deferentially and left the room when he was finished. Marcus would have liked a mirror; he could not imagine how he looked in his present condition, but Louis had not thought to offer a glimpse.

At lunchtime, one of the other young ladies brought up a tray with a bowl of steaming stew that sent a delectable aroma forth. She was a quiet girl, attentive to each spoonful that she brought to his lips, but she lacked Matilda’s cheerful spirit and chatter. Although the stew was indeed excellent, and it was a welcome change to be eating something other than broth, Marcus was not sorry when she rose from the chair at his bedside after the meal was ended.

Hubert Discovers a Friend

“But Sophia, dearest, he could be a dangerous felon. Merely because you rescued him from an attack by hoodlums does not make him an innocent victim.”

“Hubert, he could not possibly be dangerous. He has been quite meek and Dr. Loring sees him twice a week. Dr. Loring would know if he were feigning his incapacity. Why, he cannot walk without wincing in pain; Dr. Loring is astonished that there are no broken bones, but he is quite sure that the bruising is considerable.”

“I believe that I should like to take a look at this gentleman and decide for myself,” Hubert insisted.

“Yes, of course. In truth,” Sophia confessed, “we would value your insights. But there is more that I must tell you. Matilda—”

Inwardly, Hubert groaned. Wherever Matilda was, anarchy followed. He knew that the four girls were lifelong friends whose loyalty to one another was unquestioned. But Matilda and her madcap ideas seemed to hold entirely too much sway over the others. Sophia could be relied upon to show her own good sense, but when there was an issue of friendship, her loyalty triumphed.

When Sophia finished her tale, he could not speak. “Do you mean to say,” he said, “that Matilda rescued this man and then abducted him for the purposes of contriving a marriage so that she would not be obliged to submit to the union her parents had arranged?”

“We did not abduct him,” Sophia said with indignation. “We . . . surely you can see why Matilda did as she did?”

Hubert held his temper in check. Another madcap plot by Matilda and his darling Sophia was embroiled in it. The determination of the friends not to marry until all had prospective husbands had already put his own romantic interests in check, as Sophia, who loved him as he did her, had refused his proposal because her

friends lacked suitors. But Matilda, who had very probably concocted the ridiculous “all for one, one for all” matrimonial pledge, was----

Was married. Hubert realized this with a start. If Matilda, under whatever absurd conditions, had procured a husband, then the matrimonial ban must be in its final stages.

He smiled. Sophia, expecting a frown, was relieved and, although it was not proper, flung her arms around him. “You do understand, don’t you!” she exclaimed. “I knew you would, and I’m so very glad, because we do need your help. There’s no one else to go to, you see, only Matilda’s Aunt Gretchen, and she cannot help us in London, besides—“

Hubert took her hands in his. “Darling Sophia, I will do whatever I can to help. But I must meet the gentleman.”

“Of course. And then, after you have met him, you will come back down to meet with me and Matilda? Matilda needs your advice; she wishes to purchase a house in London. She has come into her inheritance from her grandparents, you see, and now that she is married, she wishes to have her own residence. Which is, you will concede, quite expected.”

“Quite. I will meet with you both. Where are Nell and Abigail?”

“They have gone shopping. Matilda insists that they must have new dresses for Christmas and she would not allow them to refuse her.”

“New dresses?”

“Matilda is determined that they are to go out in society so that they may meet eligible gentlemen.”

“And you?”

Her smile was all that he could have wished it to be. “I have already met my eligible gentleman.”

Hubert found that he was humming a tune as he ascended the staircase to the guest bedroom. Marriage seemed to be within reach thanks to Matilda’s bizarre machinations. While he could foresee obstacles ahead which Matilda had apparently not considered, he was optimistic about his own prospects.

He knocked on the door and entered, whereupon he received the second shock of the day. It couldn't be . . . but surely . . .

"I don't know what the devil scrap you've gotten into, Marcus, but you look as if you were set upon by savages."

Marcus Cromwell turned his head. Amazement was visible in his dark eyes as he beheld his friend, Hubert. He tried to speak, then made an impatient gesture toward his throat.

"I know, Sophia has acquainted me with your condition," Hubert said, sitting down in the bedside chair where Nell had sat earlier while feeding Marcus. "You seem to have endured a rather ghastly ordeal, old chap."

Marcus nodded.

"Fortunately for you, Sophia and her intrepid Amazons came to the rescue and scattered your assailants. They are fortunate to have escaped; Matilda is rather a good shot. She is a most unorthodox young woman." Hubert peered closer at Marcus. "Are you aware of everything that has transpired since the rescue?"

Marcus showed his puzzlement.

Hubert sighed. "Yes, I thought as much. You see, it's like this . . . after Matilda rescued you, she married you."

Married? Surely he had not heard correctly. He could not possibly have participated in a wedding ceremony. He had barely been able to stand, for one thing. And for another, he would not have married a woman he did not know.

Hubert saw the temper signs showing in his friend's countenance. "Yes, I know, it's not pleasant to consider that one has been tricked. But Matilda's motives were not acquisitive. She is an heiress in her own right. She is also supremely oblivious to titles, so you do not need to fear that you were commandeered into matrimony so that she could be a duchess. She doesn't know you are a duke. She hasn't a clue who you are, so I fancy that, should you choose to do so, you could easily abdicate from the marriage. Should you choose to do so," he repeated carefully so that the words lingered.

"There was a time in our past, when we were younger and

shallow,” Hubert went on, “and we were disdainful of those who lacked our status. For my part, those days are gone. I have learned, not always in pleasant circumstances, that the frivolous entertainments of youth should be cast aside after one gains the maturity to recognize what in life is truly of significance.” He spoke plainly but decorously; it was when he had suffered financial misfortune that a younger Marcus Cromwell had cast him aside.

Slowly, Marcus nodded, recognizing the merit of his friend’s words.

“I am in love with Sophia. She has no great title or rank to recommend her. Her father is a well-respected judge, her mother the daughter of a clergyman. But Sophia is honorable, lovely, intelligent, kind, and she is the most fascinating woman I shall ever meet. Her parents do not disapprove of our romance. But Sophia has vowed not to marry until her friends are on their way to becoming wives. So, as you can see, your re-entry into my life as a married man has a great import.”

A glimmer of amusement flickered in Marcus’ eyes. Then a smile appeared. Because of the bruises and the sensitive flesh, he could not smile fully, but it was enough to let Hubert know that he had heard his words and absorbed their meaning.

“If not for Matilda, Sophia, Nell and Abigail, you would be dead. There’s much to be said for serendipity, I think you agree. Whether or not you choose to honor the marriage is something that you must decide. But I hope that you will, when you are fully recovered and able to return to your role as the Duke of Winchester, consider the worth of Matilda, and I do not mean in a financial sense. She has undertaken your recovery and from what I understand, has been tireless in her care of you.”

Marcus nodded. Before learning that she had married him without his consent, he had actually given thought to courting her, even though he did not know anything about her. But that was not the case, he realized. He knew that she was solicitous and compassionate. Did it matter what her rank in society was or whether or not her parents were aristocrats? Her nobility came from character rather than bloodlines. He was a duke, but he could not claim to have been a model of propriety in his life. Would marriage to Matilda in fact, rather than in charade, be so

unpleasant?

It would not.

Unraveling the Mystery

Matilda wasted no time. “Hubert,” she said, addressing him familiarly rather than formally because to her way of thinking, if he would one day be Sophia’s husband, there was no need for decorum. “I have some questions for you.”

“Yes, Sophia has told me.”

They were in the drawing room. The maid had brought in tea and Sophia was pouring. Abigail and Nell were not yet returned, but as Hubert knew from his sister, the matter of choosing a dress could take a considerable amount of time.

He accepted the cup of tea from Sophia, served with a tender smile that warmed his heart and assured him of the sincerity of her intentions. He expected that Matilda would have a multitude of questions about her husband.

Her first question surprised him. “Hubert, do the names Grace and Henry mean anything to you?”

“Grace and Henry?” he said warily. “Why do you ask?”

“Because when—when my husband was first brought here, and Dr. Loring was giving him medicine to help him to sleep, he repeated those names often.”

“Did he?”

“Yes,” Matilda said expectantly. “They mean something to you, I can tell by the way you are not answering me.”

“You are correct. I was going to tell you. Your husband is not a stranger, at least not to me. We have been acquainted for some time. His name is Marcus Cromwell and he is the Duke of Winchester.”

Whatever reaction he was expecting, Matilda’s response startled

him. "A duke? Dear God in heaven, now I'm in for it!"

Hubert stifled a laugh. "Why do you say that?"

"It's no great matter to marry a man of one's own station," she said as if this were obvious. "But a duke? He's likely to send me to the Tower when he's well enough."

"I fancy Marcus realizes that, if not for your intervention, he would be a dead man. In fact, although he does not know it, the news has already gone about town that Marcus was killed in a duel. His half-brother and stepmother are already in the process of having the ducal estate transferred, to Henry Cromwell," Hubert said with grave emphasis. "The half-brother of Marcus. Grace is Henry's mother and the stepmother of Marcus."

Both Sophia and Matilda were shocked by this disclosure. "Is it possible that the attack on – on Marcus was not a random act?" Matilda queried.

"It may be more than possible. Marcus would know."

"As long as they believe that Marcus is dead, he is safe," Sophia deduced. "But how do we prove this when Marcus is unable to speak?"

"He will not be speechless forever," Matilda noted. "And he could, with ink and paper, tell us what we need to know."

"He will be reluctant to bring scandal on the family name," Hubert cautioned. "It would be better, perhaps, if I did a bit of investigating. If I can find out who else participated in the attack, I may be able to persuade one of the assailants to turn on his master."

"You will need funds for this," Matilda said. "I shall be able to help you."

Hubert flushed. "I was not asking for money," he said stiffly.

"No, you were not," she replied, "but this concerns me. I must do something to make amends to Marcus and the best way to do so is to find out who engineered the plot on his life. I cannot force him to remain married to me when his social obligations extend far beyond what I imagined."

“Do not be so quick to diminish your appeal,” Hubert advised. “Marcus knows that, if not for your efforts—and for the superior marksmanship of the four of you—he would be a dead man in truth and not only in rumor.”

Matilda’s expression showed a struggle between hope and uncertainty. “Do you think he can forgive me for what I have done?”

“I think that he understands that he owes you a debt. And he’s certainly no prize, looking the way he does. He’s accounted rather a Corinthian in his set. When his features are restored to their normal color and dimension, I think that you will be pleasantly surprised.”

“A shave and front teeth are no small improvement,” Sophia provided.

But for Matilda, the news that her husband was a duke was a source of dismay. She who had been accustomed to getting her way by strength of will and her own determination was now in a quandary. She had married a peer of the realm without his consent. She had done so without her parents’ knowledge. Such an impropriety would not be tolerated in the strict constraints of the ton, she knew, where a man could commit almost any vice that he chose, as long as he did not get caught and as long as he remembered his duty to his class. The Weldons were respectable, except for the unpredictable Aunt Gretchen, who did as she chose, but they were not aristocrats.

What would the Gillands think when they heard the news, for the news would certainly explode throughout England when it was made public. Would they feel that their generous hospitality and their cordiality had been abused? Would Sophia suffer from the scandal? What about Nell and Abigail?

After Hubert left and Sophia had gone to meet with her Aunt to discuss the social invitations they had received, Matilda walked slowly up the staircase. She would not be a coward. She would confess what she had done to the man she had married. And she would accept his decision.

When she opened the door, her husband, Marcus Cromwell, the Duke of Winchester, was standing by the window. He had gotten

out of the bed on his own power. He turned to smile at her. Now that he was clean-shaven and dentally restored, she could see the hint of what Hubert had told them. He was an attractive man and not at all the ugliest man in London.

"My lord," she said hesitantly. "I have come to beg your pardon."

Marcus shook his head.

"Will you not forgive me?" she said. "I never meant to . . . that is, I meant to marry you, but only because I thought you quite ordinary and indeed, ugly . . . and I thought that you would not object . . . oh, dear, I'm making a dreadful snarl of this, am I not?"

He was smiling. Then he opened his arms wide. Matilda gazed at him in confusion.

"Do you forgive me?" she asked, unable to believe her good fortune.

Marcus pointed to the note that he had penned while sitting at the desk in front of the window. Matilda took it.

My dear Matilda,

Now that I know the circumstances of my rescue, I must thank you for having rescued my heart as well as my body. My title and my station are meaningless to me because they were the reason for the attack on my life. Had you and your comrades not saved me, I would be 'the late Lord Marcus Cromwell.' Such a resolution forces a man to consider his lot in life. I admit that, when my friend Hubert first acquainted me with the circumstances of my presence here, I was vexed to think that I had been duped into marriage. But upon thought, I realize now that I have been blessed well beyond my deserving, for you did not know me. You married me and brought me here so that I would recover from my wounds. You are a most remarkable young woman; no other female of my acquaintance would have done what you have. If you can find it in your heart to accept a former profligate man as your husband, I would be honored to make you the Duchess of Winchester in a ceremony of somewhat more grandeur than what we shared at Gretna Green. When I am well enough to stand before the altar and repeat the vows which have bound men and women in holy matrimony for time immemorial, I will promise to love, honor and cherish you as no woman has ever been prized.

Your husband,

Marcus Cromwell, Duke of Winchester

Matilda raised her eyes. “But I am plain,” she protested. “And quite ordinary. And unknown to society. You will not embellish your lineage with a Weldon for a wife.”

It was not easy to kiss a woman passionately when one’s features were still tender from wounds. But as Marcus took Matilda into his arms, he found that the pain of the action was wondrously overpowered by the delight of holding her in an embrace that told her what he did not yet have the words to say. Matilda, as she surrendered to his kiss, marveled that he did not resent her for her actions. She was unfamiliar with the kisses and embraces of a gentleman, but her instincts told her that the duke was well pleased with the woman who had married him without his consent.

“You are nothing like *The Detestable*,” she murmured as he held her close.

The *Detestable*? What on earth was she talking about, Marcus wondered. But when she eagerly accepted a renewal of his affection, he decided that whatever it was, it could wait. Kissing was far more important.

Restoring Lord Marcus

Hubert had lost his fortune in the manner in which young men of London typically lost their fortune. Gaming was a practice which the young swells enjoyed until it took ownership of them. For Hubert, the cards, the dice, the reckless wager made on a whim had cost him everything, so that he was now required to live within his means, in reduced circumstances which no longer permitted him such expensive indulgences.

But those years had not been entirely wasted, he found as he made the rounds of the taverns in the disreputable sections of the city. As Henry Cromwell was making his way through the social swirl of London in the guise of the Duke of Winchester, he was sure to have men of low morals who would do his bidding. It was up to Hubert to find them.

He entered a port tavern and ordered a drink. He had not been here in a long time. The setting and the clientele did not appear to have changed for the better. No doubt there was a card game or a cockfight going on nearby. The men who were drinking kept their voices low and did not mingle in a friendly manner as they would have done in a neighborhood pub.

“Whot you lookin’ at?” growled a man sitting to his right.

“I am searching for men of a brave nature who will not shy from work that others are too cowardly to do.”

“Whot might that be, and what you payin’ for it?”

“Why should I trust you with the answer?”

The man smirked. “If you wan the deed done, you’ll have to open up now, won’t you?”

“What sort of work have you done before?”

“I’ve done what needed doin’.”

Hubert took a long sip of his drink. “That tells me nothing.”

“Whot you payin’?”

“What were you paid for your last job?”

“I was paid right well,” the man sneered. “On account of travel, you see.”

“Travel to where?”

“That be none of your business.”

“It is if you blabbed to others that you were somewhere where suspicious deeds were done and you are sought by the law.”

“The law,” the man said dismissively. “Whot’s the law to do with anything?”

“A great deal if they catch a man in a crime.”

“Us don’t get caught.”

Us. Hubert’s interest quickened. Perhaps this conversation would bear fruit where those that had taken place on the previous nights had not.

“You have associates?”

The man found this amusing. “Associates,” he repeated. “Yeah, I got associates.”

Hubert signaled to the bartender. “Another drink for my . . . associate here,” he said.

This time, when Hubert visited the Gilland home, Lord Marcus was able to join the gathering in the drawing room. His improvement during the previous fortnight had been so remarkable that Dr. Loring declared he no longer needed the weekly services of a physician. His speech had returned, and although his voice tired if he spoke too long, he was satisfied that he was finally able to communicate with words again.

“He has confirmed our suspicions,” Hubert reported, telling the others of the negotiations that he had conducted with the man in

the port tavern, who had boasted that he had been well paid for his last assignment, and how the man who had hired him was a duke, no less.

"I am surprised that he was so candid," Marcus said.

"He's in need of funds to replenish those he spent," Hubert explained "That made him brash. That and the liquor; he downed a prodigious amount of liquor in the telling of his tale."

"I can confirm that my half-brother tried to kill me," Marcus said. "But to prove that the effort was a deliberate attempt to kill me and take the title . . . that will take more evidence than merely the report of a tavern drunk."

Hubert smiled. "I told him much the same. I told him that I need an equally dark deed to be committed, but I will not risk my life or my freedom without proof that he has been both successful and discreet. It turns out that he has a grudge against Lord Henry, who neglected to pay all that he had promised. Such callous dishonor among thieves," Hubert smiled, "seems to have soured our tavern assassin on the perfidy of the aristocrats. He will only take on the task if he is paid beforehand."

"And what task is that?"

"I have been discreet to the point of mystery," Hubert smiled again. "He is not sure whether I want him to steal a bishop's miter, remove a body from Westminster Abbey, or make an attempt on the life of a Member of Parliament. He is game for anything if the price is right. But more to the point, he is interested in the opportunity."

"And when he finds out that there is no opportunity?" Marcus pressed.

"Then he will have to save his sorry neck by telling what he knows to the authorities. Sophia, can you ask your father to return to London? I believe that he is the one we need now."

"I can, but what shall I tell him?"

Marcus grinned. "Why not tell him that Matilda's husband is in need of judicial advice regarding an attempt made on his life? Do you think that would bring him back in a trice?"

Sophia's eyes sparkled. "I do believe it would," she said.

"Perhaps you could add something to that message?" Hubert suggested. "Perhaps you could tell him that you would like to be married by Christmas and your intended wishes to formally ask for your hand in marriage?"

Judge Gilland was quite willing to return to London upon receipt of the message, which was so extraordinary that it was worth sacrificing the hunt. His wife was eager to return to London for any reason, but the tantalizing reference to Sophia's hand in marriage made her even more impatient.

When faced with the judge's stern attention to his tale, the man from the tavern who hoped for employment from Hubert was quick to realize that, in order to save himself, he had to cast another to the wolves. The judge moved swiftly to arrest the Dowager Duchess and her son.

"You have, it seems, enjoyed a most eventful autumn under my roof, Your Grace," the judge said to Marcus when they were all assembled for supper. "I find that my daughter is now engaged, her dear friend is married, a plot has been uncovered and legal redress sought, and your title is restored to you. I am fearful to ever leave again, lest my family encounter another such dramatic turn of events."

"Not a bad turn of events," Lord Marcus said, "for the ugliest man in London."

Matilda blushed. "You were rather frightful looking," she defended herself, "when you were in the full flush of your wounds. But now you are quite handsome."

"Handsome enough to be married in front of family members and friends, instead of a blacksmith?" Marcus teased.

"What's this?" Mrs. Gilland asked, her gaze darting from Marcus to Matilda in search of a clue.

"Oh, nothing of significance," Marcus said. "Best not to talk about it, or Nell and Abigail will find their marital prospects blighted." He smiled at the girls, who, like Matilda, had crimsoned at his words. "I believe I may know of a gentleman or two who might think it

quite a lark to be married to women who can handle firearms as well as the four of you can.”

“Firearms? Your Grace, you have a most invigorating sense of humor.”

“I believe I do,” Lord Marcus said blandly. “I hope that my in-laws will agree when they meet me. It is likely to be a most . . . invigorating wedding.”

* * *

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For The Love of A Lord

The Story of Lillian Craig and Lord Errol Campbell

A Terrible Tragedy

What Lillian would remember for a long time, was first the smell of smoke that had bothered her as she was putting her charges to bed, and then the heat radiating from the stone walls. The Worthington Manor was the pride of Sleeper's Haven Village in Exeter County, the home of their own baron. The presence of their own noble man gave the villagers some form of security and pride. Lord Brian Worthington usually opened his home one weekend a month, for the general public to view it and have picnics on the beautifully manicured lawns. This made all the village inhabitants feel like they were a part of the family.

There'd been an open house that afternoon and the twins were exhausted from running all over the place. Lilly had only been in the Worthington household for a week but she felt as though she'd been working there forever. Henry and Stephen were boisterous five-year-olds who seemed to have endless energy and had kept her on her feet the whole day. Lady Caroline was a good guide and spent most of the day was explaining the history of the family and the manor, which had been renovated and added on to for decades. It was an old building but the baron was quickly turning it into a modern stately home.

By the time she had bathed the boys and fed them, they were already half asleep and she put them to bed, kissing their foreheads. Tonight at least, they didn't demand that she tell them a story. It was while she was getting ready for bed that she thought she smelled smoke, and when she reached above the fireplace in her bedroom, felt the warmth of the walls. The baron was working on built in heating to prevent lighting of fires in the rooms because of the smoke and also it was the modern way to go. Lilly thought it was odd that the walls were hot since it wasn't winter. Her last posting had been with a family who had built one of the most modern homes with all manner of new gadgets and they'd also had

built in heating. Lilly tried to remember whether the rooms would be heated in summer but soon ignored everything but her bed, on which she flopped and was soon fast asleep.

Sometime in the night, Lilly woke up to screams and at first she thought she was dreaming. Then she saw torches outside and what seemed to be a huge bonfire on the other side of the manor. It was the wing where Lord and Lady Worthington had their rooms, and her first thought was for the safety of the boys. Henry and Stephen were still asleep and she tried to shake them awake, but they were too groggy. Their rooms were unnaturally warm and she knew there was trouble.

“Help!” She screamed at the top of her voice. “Please help me,” she carried Henry and ran down the stairs, just as someone broke through the front door. She didn’t even wait to see who it was, but handed the still sleeping child over, then dashed back upstairs for Stephen. By the time they were clear of the house, it suddenly hit her that she hadn’t seen either of her employers.

“Where are my lord and lady?” She grabbed one of the other servants’ arm, but the man just shrugged her off, hurrying away. No one seemed to have seen Lilly’s employers and someone pushed her backward, causing her to nearly let go of Henry’s hand. She soon realized that she had to get the children to safety, even as the fire burned on furiously, the flames devouring everything in their path.

“Miss Craig,” someone called out to her and she turned to see who it was. The roaring flames gave enough light for her to recognize Reverend Thomas Wharton, the local vicar. “What happened?”

Lilly could only shake her head, hands firmly holding on to the two little boys who were now sobbing. “I don’t know,” she said finally.

“Where is Lord Worthington, have you seen him and the baroness?”

“No, reverend, it’s just the boys and me.”

And it was only the two of them who survived the horrendous fire. Being a Saturday, most of the servants had gone to the village to either attend to family matters or else join in the local barn dance. It was only Lilly who’d been home apart from her employers and the little boys. The baron and baroness perished in the inferno for

no one could reach them in time. Hours later as she was seated in the temporary safety of the vicarage, Lilly was left staring at her two charges, who were once again sleeping like little babies, unaware that their lives had changed forever.

* * *

“Darling, what do you think about this one?” Lady Abigail Wentworth held up a blue muslin cloth against her cheek. “Will it do for my going away dress?”

“Yes, my love, it most certainly will,” Lord Errol Campbell had a fixed smile on his face and the muscles were straining. His face felt like it was carved in wax and he wondered how much longer he was going to be subjected to this torture, shopping for his bride’s trousseau. Abby didn’t understand that the last thing any man wanted to do was to be shopping with his soon-to-be bride.

“You look bored,” she dropped the blue cloth and picked up another one which was peach in colour. “What about this one?” When Errol didn’t immediately respond, she turned to him, pouting and making her lower lip tremble. It always got to him and he sighed inwardly as he pulled her into his arms. “I’m sorry for dragging you into all this,” she said in a childlike voice and he wanted to grit his teeth. Abby was twenty-two years old but liked to behave like a two-year-old, especially when she wasn’t getting her own way.

“I’m just tired as I was with a few of my tenants for much of the morning, sorting their various problems out. I’m quite exhausted but if you’d like to finish your shopping, we can return home.”

“I won’t be but a moment,” now that she’d been allowed to continue shopping, Abby’s face lit up again. It was nearly another three hours before Abby finally called it a day, and all because she wanted to take some hot chocolate at the roadside cafe just across the street from the milliner’s shop where she’d been getting some hats.

Errol was sure that Abby wanted to sit outside just so everyone passing by could see the various hat boxes and other packages that

she had. Abby was one of those women who loved to show off to everyone who was interested. A true London socialite, Abby never missed the chance to be seen, while Errol was the exact opposite. He preferred a quiet life but with his upcoming marriage, knew that it would be impossible.

Well, he thought, he'd made his bed and had to lie on it, for the sake of his estate. His gambler of a father had ruined the estate and his only recourse was to marry a woman who would come with a huge dowry, if he wanted to save himself from shame. Hence, Lady Abigail Wentworth, whose father though only a baron, was a very wealthy man. The dowry he'd offered had made Errol decide that he could put up with his spoilt and self-centered fiancée, even though sometimes he longed that the union would have been based on love.

Errol knew for a fact that Abby didn't love him, but he was handsome and according to him, he often felt like one of the items that she liked to collect and show off to people. That was the reason she always insisted on him accompanying her wherever her whims took her. He always told himself that it was a small price to pay for the restoration of his family estate, but it was just a matter of time before he couldn't take it anymore.

"Patience," he told himself, taking a deep breath as he opened the door to his bedroom later that evening. He deliberately kept it dark and the drapes were drawn all the time, just to match his mood these days. He needed the money but he also needed his sanity and wondered how long he was going to continue pretending to be the happily engaged groom-to-be.

Change Of Plans

“My Lord Duke,

Felicitations from the Vicarage of Sleepers’ Haven in Exeter County. My name is Reverend Thomas Wharton and I am in charge of this particular vicarage.

Seven days ago, there was a tragic fire in the village and it took the lives of Lord and Lady Worthington, our local baron and his lady. You may be wondering what all this has got to do with you, but Lady Caroline Worthington nee Sanders is probably familiar to you.

I have in my possession what I would call a letter with a special request from Lady Carol. This makes me wonder if my lady had a premonition that something would happen to her and was preparing for her children’s future. My lord and lady had twin boys, Henry and Stephen and right now these poor boys are homeless. They’re in the care of their governess, Miss Lillian Craig who has been kind enough to stay on, even though she’d only been working for the family for one week prior to the tragedy.

To get to the point, Lady Carol indicated that should anything ever happen to her and she wasn’t able to bring her sons up, that I should contact you. She named you as the boys’ legal guardian, and that’s the reason I have written to you. The vicarage can only offer a temporary home to these children and as their legal and sole guardian, you need to come to Exeter and take over responsibility for them.

Please get in touch with me as soon as possible, and I will be able to facilitate everything so these poor orphans can have a stable home again. They’ve lost everything, the poor lambs and more than ever, they need you, your grace.

In the Lord’s service,

Rev. Thomas Wharton.”

Errol read the letter three more times before it dawned on him that

he was now responsible for two boys, whose ages he didn't even know. The vicar hadn't mentioned that in his letter.

Why had Caroline Sanders named him as the legal and sole guardian of her sons, and yet the only connection between them was his late brother, Alfred? From what he could recall, Alfred, who was set to be next in line as the duke after their father, and Lady Carol Sanders the only daughter of a baron had once been engaged. Carol's parents were dead and she was brought up by an elderly aunt who had passed away just a few days after she got engaged to Alfred. The two had been so deeply in love that for twenty-year-old Errol, it was sickening to watch them moon and fawn all over each other.

Then suddenly, the engagement was over and within days Carol got married to a man much older than her. It broke Alfred completely and he turned to drinking heavily. He stopped caring about his appearance and the estate and this worried his family. One evening as he was returning home from the local village pub, he stumbled into the path of an oncoming carriage that was going full speed. He was tossed aside, his head hit the pavement and he broke his neck. His body was found early the next morning by the village constable who was on his way to the small precinct where he conducted his law keeping matters.

Errol swore never to forgive Carol for his brother's death and he'd all but forgotten about her. But that was until the letter came to Dorchester. It was just by sheer luck that he'd come down to check on his few remaining tenants when a messenger delivered the letter. These days he usually spent most of his time in London as he prepared for his forthcoming nuptials at the insistence of his betrothed.

What would make a woman he hadn't seen in six years appoint him to bring her children up after her death? Was this her way of getting back at his family, but what had they done to her? She was the one who suddenly announced that her engagement to Alfred was over and left him to get married to another man. Or probably, Carol thought the Duke of Dorchester's family still had money like they did in days past.

He chuckled softly to himself, "Poor Carol, what my few remaining

tenants bring in is hardly enough to feed this household, let alone taking care of the needs of two growing boys.” Dorchester Estate was in a mess and the last thing he wanted was to get involved in someone else’s problems. Then, there was Abigail to consider. From what he knew about her, she wasn’t one who would agree to his taking on children no matter their ages. She loved being the centre of attention and would never consent to sharing his affections with anyone else.

Errol had no experience with children and in the absence of family he hadn’t even had the luxury or bane of dealing with nephews or nieces. Perhaps if Alfred had lived, by now he might have been an uncle. The thought of two children coming into his life was quite bewildering and the sudden responsibility thrust upon him was frightening.

Knowing the boys’ ages might have helped but even as he thought that, knew that it wasn’t entirely true. The closest he’d ever come to interacting with children was when he had to give instructions to his two stable boys who were about sixteen. What did one do with little children, he wondered, for he guessed Carol’s sons to be anywhere between one to five years old. How was he expected to effectively communicate with children that young so as to understand their needs?

Then he laughed in self derision. He was getting way ahead of himself because he didn’t think he was up to traveling hundreds of miles to a village somewhere in Exeter to take on a responsibility that he had no idea why it had been given to him.

* * *

“Miss Craig, I know that you’ve only been governess to Henry and Stephen for a few weeks, but would you consider waiting until their guardian comes before leaving?”

Lillian turned her sorrowful blue eyes to the vicar. “I wish I could do that, but I received an invitation for a new posting in London, and according to Lady Imogene, I need to report within a few days or the post goes to someone else. It’s a good job and the pay is also

attractive. They also mentioned that the family travels a lot and I would love to see the world someday.”

“I understand, but find it in your heart to wait just a little bit. Once you’ve handed the boys over to their guardian, Lord Errol Campbell from Dorchester, you can then leave. See how these little ones are so attached to you,” he pointed at Henry and Stephen who’d refused to leave her side even for a moment. The only time Lilly got any rest was when they were asleep, but even then she had to be alert for her two charges had started experiencing nightmares.

It was two weeks now since their parents had perished in the fire and there was barely anything to be buried. The boys had wept as she tried to explain to them that their father and mother were no more and were now resting in heaven. Lilly felt their pain and confusion and wished she could do something for them, but she also had a future to consider. Besides, the boys’ guardian would be coming to take them away soon, though she wondered when since according to Reverend Wharton, he hadn’t yet responded to the letter sent.

What if the guardian was dead, or worse, didn’t want the little boys? What if he was an elderly man who could barely take care of himself, let alone two very active little boys? What would happen to them? Already, she’d heard one of the women in church talking about putting the children into a foundling home and it broke her heart just thinking about it. They had no living relatives, at least none that had been traced yet. Who would pay her wages now?

“I want Mama,” Henry muttered, his voice shaking and eyes filling up with tears. On seeing his brother’s sorrow, Stephen put his left thumb into his mouth and started sucking it. Hitherto, Lilly hadn’t seen such behaviour from the boy and it caused her concern. The little boys were grieving and much as the vicar and herself had told them about heaven and seeing their parents one day, they still didn’t fully comprehend the concept of death. “Miss Lilly, I want Mama.”

“Oh my love,” she kissed his forehead. “You have Stephen and me,” she pulled both boys close. “We’ll be alright,” she said as much for herself as for the boys. She really had no idea what she was going to do about the two of them. Her face was creased in concern above

the boy's heads and she bit her bottom lip anxiously.

Off To Exeter

When Errol couldn't sleep for the third night in a row, he finally admitted that Reverend Wharton's letter had unsettled him. He couldn't for the life of him imagine why Carol would have left the boys under his care. If he was to find peace, then he was going to have to go to Sleepers' Haven in Exeter in order to appease his mind.

One person wasn't too happy with his decision, however. "Those children aren't your responsibility," Abigail screamed at him. "Didn't you tell me that your brother is dead because of that woman? That she broke off their engagement and caused him to begin drinking heavily? And now you're thinking about going off to the end of the world..."

"It's Sleepers' Haven," Errol found himself interrupting his already angry fiancée and thought she would explode.

"Exactly! Where is that village located?"

"In Exeter."

Abigail glared at Errol like she would have liked to say something more and he knew he had to do all he could to appease and bring her to his side. A lot was at stake and he didn't want to lose her, not at this time in his life. Walking over to her, he took both her hands in his. "My love, you don't have to worry about anything. It's you that I'm going to marry and will spend the rest of my life with."

"You don't have to go to Exeter, why don't you just send money so those brats can be put in an orphanage? I'm sure the church runs one, and then they will cease to be your responsibility. Every year, we will be sure to send our donation to the orphanage for their upkeep."

"Please understand, at least let me just go and find out why Carol chose to make me their guardian. There must be something more to

this than we're seeing."

"I don't agree. That woman ruined your brother's life and now she wants to ruin our lives too," Abby let the tears run down her cheeks. "Don't you see? She never liked your family and now that she heard we were engaged, she deliberately made you the children's guardian. She has ruined me," Abby put the back of her hand on her forehead and dramatically sank into one of the cushioned seats. "My life is ruined."

Errol wanted to roll his eyes at the theatrics but sighed instead. "Should I decide to take on this responsibility, Henry and Stephen's presence in this household won't interfere with our lives. Besides, they'll always be with their governess and maids so we don't have to see them. But since I was named their guardian, at least let me go down to Exeter and see what needs to be done. If I have to bring them to Dorchester, we will both decide what to do."

It was a very reluctant Abigail who allowed Errol to get into his coach and leave for Exeter. He'd expected some resistance from her, but not to this extent. How could he just relegate the children to an orphanage without finding out why their mother thought he was the best person to bring them up?

It was a puzzle that he wasn't able to solve even by the time his footman drove the weary horses into the best inn in the village. Horseshoe Inn was owned by a harassed looking man and his equally agitated wife, but they gave him what they termed their best room.

"Oscar, we'll just have to make do with these shabby quarters, but take care that nobody makes away with our horses."

"Yes, your grace."

* * *

Lillian was giving the boys their simple breakfast of fresh bread and warm milk, when she heard a carriage drawing up to the front door of the vicarage. Reverend Thomas stood up and looked out through the window, then turned to her with a huge smile on his face. "That

must be his lordship.”

“His lordship?”

“The boys’ guardian. The one their mother appointed.”

“How would you know? Quite a number of carriages drive up to the vicarage from time to time.”

“Not one emblazoned with what is obviously a family crest. Wait here.”

When Rev. Thomas walked into the small dining room with a tall and distinguished man in his mid to late twenties, Lilly gasped audibly. She’d imagined an elderly looking man when the vicar mentioned that the visitor was a nobleman. This gentleman was handsome, but more than that, Henry and Stephen would look exactly like him in twenty years’ time down to the colour of their eyes and dark hair! And all blood had drained from his face and for a moment she worried that he was about to swoon.

Errol took a step into the dining room and stopped abruptly, the shock on his face evident. It was like looking at a double version of himself some years ago.

Reverend Thomas had a thoughtful look on his face, and then gave a small nod. “It’s like looking in a mirror nearly twenty five years ago, isn’t it?” He commented in a soft voice.

The boys just gave the visitor a cursory glance before returning to their breakfast.

“This is Miss Lillian Craig, the boys’ governess. This is Stephen and Henry.”

Errol was still too shocked to speak.

“Your grace, please come with me.” Once they were in the vicar’s small office, Errol was handed a glass of brandy. He took a sip, grimaced at the taste and put it aside. Taking a deep breath, he turned to his host. “What is going on, Reverend?”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t even have to ask why Carol named me the boys’ guardian.”

"She confessed to me a few months ago, around the same time when she gave me the letter naming you as guardian. I wanted to know why, when her husband was still alive and she told me an interesting story about a young man named Alfred."

"My older brother."

"Apparently, when Miss Caroline found out that she was pregnant, she mentioned it to her beloved. They'd been in love and were going to get married, so she expected that Alfred would own up to the responsibility and push the wedding date forward. Unfortunately, things didn't turn out the way she hoped, so she had to find a way out."

"But Alfred never told me any of this."

"Alfred told Lady Caroline that he wasn't ready to be a father or something like that, and afraid to be made the laughing stock of Dorchester and London, the young woman accepted the suit of an old family friend, Lord Brian Worthington." The vicar shrugged. "They had a happy marriage and Lord Worthington loved the boys as if they were his own. At the time, I thought they were his children but when Carol told me her story, I finally understood."

"It's so amazing how much they look like my brother."

Reverend Thomas chuckled. "You should take a closer look into the mirror, your grace. You and your brother must have really looked alike."

Errol smiled sadly, "We were often mistaken for twins, regardless of the fact that Alfred was two years older than me." He sighed, tapping his fingers on the table. "I have to take the boys back to Dorchester with me, but I don't know who will look after them."

"Why not offer Miss Lillian the post? The little ones are quite used to her and she's good with them. She'd only been with the family for one week when the tragedy happened, and in all this time she hasn't received any wages, but she hasn't run away. You should be aware that one or two other wealthy families have tried to get her to go and work for them but she refused to abandon the two boys. She said she would wait to hand them over to you before moving on to her next posting."

“Is that the young lady seated in the dining room with the boys?” At the vicar’s nod, Errol groaned inwardly. It wasn’t that he doubted Lillian Craig’s credentials and ability to take care of the boys, it was just that he had a very jealous fiancée. He was sure Abby wouldn’t welcome the presence of another woman in his household, regardless of the fact that she was the boys’ governess.

“Is there a problem, your grace?”

“I want the boys, they’re my blood. It’s what Alfred would have wanted, and since this is so, the older twin is actually the one who should be the duke, since I only got to be that because of my brother’s untimely death.”

“Well, no one is stopping you from taking them.”

“It’s the governess. Isn’t she a little too young?”

“Miss Craig may look young, but she’s very competent. Or is there another reason why you think she might not be the best person to look after the little boys?”

“Couldn’t I just find another governess for them in Dorchester? Someone a little older perhaps?”

“Ah!” The vicar nodded. “Perchance, are you married?”

“Engaged.”

“Tells a lot! The thing is, the boys will need time to adjust to their new life, surely you can understand that. Miss Craig can’t just abandon them to you.”

“Their new governess and my duchess will learn to take care of them.”

“Your grace, please consider. Henry and Stephen have lost the security they knew and they’re counting on Miss Craig. It could be terribly damaging for the boys if she was to just suddenly disappear from their lives. If they still lived in their own home, among a familiar environment, it might be easier. However you’re not only taking them to a new home, but to a totally new county. It won’t hurt you to have a little help from her at the start and after three or so months, you can then release her and bring in someone new.”

Errol suddenly brightened up. The vicar was right. The boys would need time to get accustomed to a new governess and their new home, and who better than Miss Lillian Craig to help them do it? “Do you think that will work?”

“Indeed, you have my word on it.”

New Home, New Experiences

Lillian walked around the bedroom that had been allocated to her in the duke's house. It was while they were on their way to Dorchester that she had found out that he was a duke. She'd imagined him to be a baron or marquis, never a duke. Though she was impressed by the title and the man as well, seeing the house in the light of day made her wonder just what had happened to the family money. Perhaps Lord Errol Campbell the Duke of Dorchester was a wastrel who'd squandered the family wealth.

Poor boys, she thought about Stephen and Henry, who were sleeping soundly on the other side of the door. She couldn't believe that she'd been convinced to come to Dorchester, when her intent had been to end up in London and at another job. When she'd mentioned this to Lord Errol, he'd practically begged her to stay with the boys.

She'd only done it because the twins nearly became prostrate with sorrow when she tried to tell them that she would be leaving them. Their uncle had come for them and so they didn't need her anymore. Their wails and screams had ripped through Lilly's heart and they wouldn't be comforted.

"I know that you've probably made other plans for your life, but consider my nephews. They're so attached to you and I believe it would be in their best interests if we slowly weaned them off your affections."

"But I had already promised my new employer that I would join her as soon as I handed the boys over to their guardian, who is you. My work is done."

"I do realize that, Miss Craig," he looked so lost that Lilly's heart was touched. He looked just like her charges when they were begging her not to put them to bed early, or when they wanted some more syrup on their pancakes. Stephen and Henry would be

very handsome when they grew up, and for a moment she felt sorrowful that she wouldn't be there to see them grow.

She had come to the Worthingtons through good references from her last employers and she'd hoped that she would be with them for a long while. Being with two very boisterous boys had helped overcome her own pain, caused by the betrayal of one she had loved and trusted. It surprised her that in just three weeks, she'd nearly forgotten about Miles.

His love for a rich older woman had him breaking their engagement off just a few days before their wedding, and getting away from it all had been all she could think of at the time. Now that she'd had a few days to think about it, Miles Brown was a cowardly man who couldn't face her to break off their engagement, instead he'd done it with a hastily written note that had been dropped at her living quarters. As a result she'd been unable to go to work and had begged to be released from her obligations two weeks early. A few weeks earlier she had served her employers with notice of intent to leave them due to her upcoming marriage.

Even now as she closed her eyes and leaned her head against the window, the only face that came up was that of her new employer, the handsome duke. It made her slightly annoyed with herself but she admitted that she'd agreed to the posting only because she didn't immediately want to be parted from the man who made her realize that what she'd felt for Miles was just childish infatuation and not love.

How was it possible that she'd fallen in love with Errol Campbell, a duke, in just three days? Was she mad?

A sound at the doorway made her turn around to find the object of her thoughts observing her with a curious look in his eyes. His cobalt blue intense gaze unnerved her so much that she immediately blushed and turned away. "I'm sorry, your grace. Did you want something?"

"I just wanted to check up on the boys. Have they settled in well?"

"They're fast asleep, your grace."

"That's good, after the excitement of the past few weeks and the

long journey from Exeter, the poor fellows must have been exhausted.”

“That they were; they barely made it through their dinner and baths before they were out like light.”

He stepped further into the room and suddenly Lilly felt as though she couldn’t breathe. “And you, Miss Craig? How are you settling in?”

“Alright, your grace. This is a beautiful room and I’m grateful.”

“My mother insisted on ensuring that our governesses were well taken care of, just to appease them so they wouldn’t leave.” Errol picked up a small figurine that was on the mantle. “Alfred and I were very lively children, Stephen and Henry remind me of ourselves when we were their age. I’m amazed at how quickly they have taken to you, given that you only joined their household a few weeks ago.”

“They are such delightful boys, very curious and adventurous, but also taking to their lessons with equal passion as they do their play, your grace.”

They both turned towards the window when they heard a carriage drawing up to the front of the house. “Well, I will leave you to settle in. Dinner will be brought up to you and the boys, and you’ll only join me downstairs when I say so,” he saw her pale and felt badly that he had to make such an announcement. But until he was sure about Abby’s reception of the twins and their beautiful governess, he wasn’t going to risk any shouting matches or tantrums.

He left the room and closed the door gently behind him, pausing for a while to collect himself. Abby was very observant and she would immediately tell something was wrong if he went down without being prepared. From what he’d seen of Miss Lillian Craig, she was a gentle creature and he doubted that she would be any match for his very jealous and over possessive fiancée. There was bound to be trouble the moment Abby set her eyes on Lilly and he wanted to delay their meeting for as long as possible.

But his fiancée had plans of her own! Immediately when she set

foot into the house, her demands began. "Where are those children?" tossing her gloves and reticule on the table in the hallway, she walked towards the drawing room. "And don't tell me they're not here, because everyone in the village is talking about them. I want to see them for myself." Which was quite an exaggeration according to Errol, for no one save the servants of his household knew about the children's presence in Dorchester.

"Will you be patient a little while? The poor boys are exhausted after the journey from Exeter, and also given what they've been going through. Their governess will bring them down as soon as they get up, I gave her those instructions."

Errol's words appeased Abby but only for a short time. "I'm going up to see those boys. After all, they've come into our lives and I'll be expected to show some form of interest in them. What better time than now?" And with that, she marched up the stairs and burst into the boy's room where they were just getting up. One look at Lillian, who was helping her charges, and the blood immediately drained from Abby's face. "Who are you?" She turned to Errol who was behind her. "Who is this woman?"

"This is Miss Lillian Craig, the boys' governess. Miss Lillian, this is Lady Abigail Wentworth, my fiancée." Lillian curtsied.

"Good evening, my lady."

Abby ignored her, glared at the boys who immediately started whimpering and then she flounced out of the room, Errol in hot pursuit. She didn't stop until she had reached the drawing room. "I demand that you send those children and that woman away."

"You know I can't send the boys away, Abby. I discovered that they're my brother's sons."

"You lie," she hissed. "That woman must have cast a spell on you to make you think those boys are related to you."

"Abby," Errol was trying very hard to hold on to his patience. "Stephen and Henry are my nephews and even you can see the likeness. The only reason I brought Miss Lillian was to take care of them is because they got attached to her and it wasn't easy separating them. But rest assured, as soon as I find another

governess, she will be leaving.”

But Abby was having none of that. She drew her gloves on and gave him a cold look. “You need to make up your mind whether it’s me or the boys. I’m not going to take care of someone else’s illegitimate brats.

“Don’t call them that,” Errol frowned. “It’s not fair to be angry at little boys who’ve just lost their mother and the only father they ever knew. Please be patient, my love,” he tried to take her hand but she drew away.

“I’m leaving now and won’t set foot into this house until you send word that that woman and those boys are no longer living under your roof,” she was momentarily overcome by passion and grabbed him. “Send them away, my darling. Can’t you see that they’re already coming between us, ruining our love?”

“Abby,” he patted her arm gently. “Those little boys are innocent of any wrong. I went up to Exeter to find out why Caroline Sanders had named me their guardian and was prepared to place them into a foundling home.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “The moment I saw them, I knew that they were my brother’s sons and there’s no way I was going to turn my back on them. Please understand that.”

Abby pulled away as if someone had struck her, turning so pale that he feared she might swoon. “Are you alright, why don’t you sit down?”

“Don’t touch me,” she said in a cold voice. “Don’t contact me unless you get rid of those people. I’m giving you three days,” she said, picking up her reticule.

“My lady,” Errol had never addressed Abby in such a manner and she paled once again. “Instead of extending the issue please let me give you my answer here and now.” He took a deep breath. “I’ll never turn my nephews out of their rightful home, because I know that if it was Alfred in my place right now, he would protect my offspring too. I’m sorry you feel so strongly about them, but they’re innocent and harmless children and shouldn’t have to lose another home.”

“Very well then,” she walked stiffly to the door, then turned around. “You’ll be hearing from my father,” and slammed the door so hard that Errol felt as if his teeth were jarred from the jaw.

Here Comes Trouble

Trouble was brewing, and Errol had a feeling that it wasn't going to be something that would quickly pass. Just an hour after Lady Abigail had exited his house in anger, a messenger was sent to deliver a note to him from her father. The footman didn't stay a single minute longer than was necessary and as Errol turned to enter the house, the note in his hand, he saw Lilly standing uncertainly at the top of the stairs. Putting it away, he took long strides towards the staircase.

"Miss Lillian, did you need something from me? Please come down."

Lilly shook her head slightly. "I'd better not leave the boys for too long. It's just that Lady Abigail looked very angry and I was coming down to apologize to her because our presence seems to have unnerved her."

Errol smiled, "Think nothing of it," he joined her and led the way to the nursery. "Let me see how my nephews are doing."

"They were a little shaken at the display of anger," there was a note of recrimination in her voice but when he turned sharply to look at her, all he could see was innocence on her face. "Stephen and Henry haven't been exposed to anger and arguments all their lives, so it's natural for them to react to such."

"Are they alright?"

"I believe so, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to come out to the landing," they'd reached the nursery and Errol paused for a brief moment before opening the door.

"I don't hear any sounds from within."

"That's because they're busy playing with the toys that you so thoughtfully provided for them. They lost all theirs in the fire and it

hasn't been easy."

Errol found himself reaching out a hand, touching her soft cheek and in the dim light, thought she blushed. "You've also been through a lot and for that, I'm sorry. Lady Abigail won't be bothering you or the boys again."

"I'm truly sorry to hear that. If you'd like me to speak with her...."

Errol chuckled softly, "Oh, I would love to see that happening, but as I said, it's no bother. What's done is done, and now we have to pay attention to the little ones." He opened the door and the twins immediately looked up and flashed him identical smiles, and it gave him such a warm feeling within that he was glad he'd decided to choose them over Abby.

Ignoring the letter that was burning a hole in his pocket, Errol spent nearly one hour on the floor with the boys and Lilly felt such a deep longing within her. Despite the fact that Lord Campbell had come into fatherhood unexpectedly, he seemed to be taking it all in his stride. He frolicked on the floor with the boys and finally she had to call it a day.

"Time for your snack, story and then bed."

"Miss Lilly can Uncle Errol read us our bedtime story?" Henry was on Errol's back while Stephen was holding the scarf that they'd begged from Lilly, which was what they were using as pretend reins. The duke was supposed to be their pony and they were taking turns riding on his back.

"Please Miss Lilly!" Errol joined in begging the boys and she had to give in to their similar expressions. Errol wasn't good for her health, that much she admitted to herself, but he was a nobleman and she was just the governess. The sooner she got over her silly infatuation of him, the better it would be for everyone. Besides, with the very beautiful and stylish Lady Abigail, she stood no chance at winning the duke's affections. Their quarrel was just temporary and she was sure they would reconcile and probably get married soon. The good thing was that she would be long gone before that happened.

"Alright then, but you have to say your prayers first and then your uncle will read you your bedtime story."

It felt good, that's all Errol thought about as he prepared himself for bed. His personal valet, Robert, was putting his coat away when he exclaimed softly.

"Robert, what's the problem?"

"Your grace, there seems to be some letter or note in your pocket," it was customary for the valet to check all the pockets for any documents or items. He pulled it out and handed it over to Errol.

"Oh dear," Errol sighed. It was the letter from Abby's father that he'd clean forgotten about as he spent at least two hours with the twins. They were delightful children and he found himself silently thanking Carol for giving him this opportunity to be their foster father. Alfred would have loved his sons and for a moment, Errol allowed the grief to wash over him. But not for long for he held a letter that he was almost afraid to open.

Lord Thomas Wentworth was a fine fellow but with only one great weakness. His daughter Abigail. Though only a baron, he'd made his wealth overseas while working for the British Indian Trading Company. He held a lot of clout in society, and crossing him often meant social suicide for the offender. According to Lord Thomas, Abigail was his princess and angel and anyone who wanted to remain in his good graces must literally worship her.

Errol knew that Thomas had accepted his suit because he felt his daughter deserved to be a duchess, even though had he had his way, she would be a member of the royal family. Still, he was generous enough to even give Errol part of the dowry so he could begin renovations on the manor and estate where his princess would be moving to.

"Well, might as well get it over and done with," Errol said as he tore open the expensive envelope and pulled out the bonded and emblazoned writing sheet. One single sheet of paper that he knew was about to change his life forever, and as he perused through it, turned as white as the paper he held and hastily sat down on his bed before he swooned.

“It has come to my attention that the engagement between my daughter Abigail and yourself has been broken due to a misdemeanour. My poor princess is distraught and hasn’t eaten since she came home from your house.

In view of this, I will kindly request that you reimburse me the part dowry payment that I have already given to you. This is so I can prepare to find a more suitable husband for my princess. I would appreciate this being done within the next seven days.”

The note had no salutation and neither had it been signed, and Errol felt slighted. But what was worse were the implications of the note. Where was he supposed to get nearly ten thousand pounds to give back to the baron? He could perhaps go and plead for more time, but that would be an exercise in futility. The baron wasn’t known to be very kind to those who owed him money. If he wanted his money within seven days, then he was going to have his money within seven days. Nothing short of that would appease him. In any case, it would release Errol from the engagement and give him time to concentrate on his nephews and their future. And a certain governess whose face had taken permanent residence in his mind!

Desperate Measures

“You had an affair with Carol, just admit it,” Abby screeched, flinging things all around the study. “Why are you denying it and the evidence is clear for everyone to see?”

“For the last time, Abby, I didn’t have an affair with Carol. I barely knew the woman and at the time she was engaged to my brother, I was only about twenty.”

“Men have fathered children even when they’re as young as fourteen so that’s not an excuse. Just look at how closely those brats resemble you, and now you want to go and lie about it?”

“Clearly, there’s no reasoning with you.”

“Oh, so now I’m being unreasonable?”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Errol was tired of the shouting match, though to his credit, it was Abby doing all the shouting. He was sure the whole of Dorchester could hear her and wondered what they were thinking. Worse, her voice carried and he didn’t want to imagine how his nephews were reacting to the disturbance.

Even though returning the dowry had cost him a lot, he was relieved that their engagement was over, now he could go on with his life. The only trouble was that Abigail had insisted on coming back and in her usual selfish way, had overlooked all that her father had put him through.

“You never loved me,” she pouted and whereas before he’d thought is somewhat pretty, now all it did was irritate him. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have chosen those brats over me.”

“Listen, my lady. You chose to end our engagement for a reason I couldn’t understand. You were demanding that I choose you over my dead brother’s sons and the poor boys have no one else in the world.” He shook his head. “You put the advertisement in the

newspapers about the end of our engagement, so I don't understand why you came back here again."

Abigail didn't want to imagine that she had actually lost Errol forever. She'd expected him to come crawling back to her when her father sent him the note but none of that happened. Instead, she'd heard from reliable sources that he'd sold some of the family properties to settle the advance dowry her father had demanded back. Still, she'd held on to hope that he would be missing her for she believed that he was quite besotted with her but two weeks down the line, and he'd not as much as sent her a note. It hurt that he would forget all about her but she was sure it all had to do with the new governess.

"It's all about her, isn't it?"

"What's about who?"

"That governess! You're attracted to her and that's why you're passing me over." She stood up. "Well, if you want to embarrass your family name with the servants then go ahead, but I'll not be a part of it."

Errol watched Abby going out and shook his head. The woman was so dramatic and he hoped she would finally leave him alone. He had a lot on his mind, the paramount thing being how he was going to take care of his family. For the short term they would cope, but soon they would be starving if things didn't change.

* * *

If Errol thought Abby's screeching was bad, he realized that things were worse when he attended a ball they'd been invited to together and everyone literally turned their noses up at him. He felt uncomfortable when he experienced their whispers and saw their glares.

It became worse when snide remarks passed all over his head and he didn't even last thirty minutes at the ball. Abigail was the life of the party and he saw her laughing and flirting with a number of young men, some of whom she wouldn't have even greeted before.

He knew that it was all a show that had been put on to slight and embarrass him.

Lilly was getting herself some warm milk from the kitchen when she heard a carriage drawing up at the front door. She was aware that the duke was out for one of the many balls that were taking place, and wondered who the visitor could be. Reynolds, the old butler had since retired since his arthritis was acting up and she didn't feel very comfortable opening the door to a stranger at this time of the night.

As she stood in the hallway staring at the massive door, she was surprised when Reynolds dragged himself along the corridor. "It's the master," he said by way of explanation, going on to open the door. Errol strode in, a resigned look on his face.

"I didn't expect anyone to be up at this time," he said after waving at the butler. "Are the boys alright?"

"Yes, your grace." She turned to leave but something held her back. She sighed inwardly and faced him once again. "Is everything alright, your grace?"

"Miss Craig, life is very unfair sometimes, but what to do?"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head at first, then nodded. "I'm sorry that my mood is most foul at this hour and please pardon me in advance for any negative reactions. Shall we retire to the drawing room?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Please dispense with all titles from now on, for I don't feel worthy of them."

"It wouldn't be proper, your grace." She followed him to the drawing room and sat down. He took the opposite seat from her and held his head in his hands. From the close distance she could see the tightness around his mouth and knew that he was under much stress.

"It was a most horrible evening," he started. "Never have I been so humiliated and scorned by people who have all along seemed to be friends."

“Was there any reason for that, your grace?”

“Lady Abigail was holding court and from the looks she was throwing me, she must have been spreading rumours. Did you know that she’s claiming that I got Lady Carol in the family way and abandoned her?”

“I’m sorry to hear that, your grace.”

His lips tightened. “I don’t want anyone coming here to make life difficult for my nephews. This is a small village and with all the nasty rumours going around, it’s just a matter of time before people start coming here with all manner of reasons. Their main intention will be just to have a look at the boys and see if what Lady Abigail is saying is true.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, sir. I’ll make sure no one has access to the twins, and mercifully we don’t have a whole retinue of servants who would make things worse.”

“I had to let nearly all of them go because the estate is in a mess and I wasn’t able to afford their wages,” the sadness in his voice told her that it hadn’t been an easy decision for him to make and she found herself respecting him even more. He’d given up his marriage for the two little boys who were now his responsibility and that had greatly moved her. A few days ago when Lady Abigail came to the house, she’d heard the young woman shouting and snuck out of the house with the boys, intending to get them as far away from any disturbances as possible. On their way back, Lady Abby who’d been riding a beautiful mare, had passed them, glared at her with so much dislike that she’d gasped. The woman was trouble for the boys especially, and Lilly wasn’t going to give her a chance to harm her charges in any way.

“I’m sorry about that.”

He made a sound signifying his impatience. “Would you stop saying that! None of it is your fault,” then he waved a hand. “I’m sorry, things have been so difficult these past few days and now with the whole village turning their backs against me, I don’t know what to do.”

Lilly longed to reach out a hand and wipe his brow but knew that it

wasn't proper. She was just a servant and it was even odd for them to be seated together at this late hour, especially since she wasn't appropriately dressed. But she found herself unwilling to leave the poor man alone.

"My lord, what I know about people who like to spread rumours about others is that they're really sad and just lashing out in their pain. Since they're unable to control whatever is happening around them, they usually feel that striking out at others will give them some form of relief."

"And does it?" There was a softness in his eyes that hadn't been there earlier.

"Unfortunately, no. The trouble is that at some point, the truth will come out and then their rumours will be dismissed as falsehoods. What then happens to the person or people is that no one can trust them again, and they end up losing friends."

"Who made you so wise, young lady?"

"I've been governess since I turned eighteen and worked for two families. My first employer was a very wise lady who never let what other people thought about her bother her at all. She lived life on her own terms and people learnt to respect her for it."

"Why didn't you stay with her then?"

Lilly smiled, "I wasn't dismissed with bad behaviour," and his slight flush made her realize that he'd been thinking along those lines. "My employer's family was relocating to Paris, France and I didn't want to go along. So she gave me a good recommendation and that's how I ended up with Lord and Lady Worthington. The Earl worked in the foreign office and got the posting abroad."

"Though Paris might have been a pleasant experience for you, I'm glad you decided not to go." His eyes had an undecipherable message, "My nephews have gained a wonderful governess for I'm sure that not many young ladies would have stayed for three weeks with them under their circumstances."

"That's not true, the boys are so lovely that no one would have just willingly abandoned them."

“You’ve got a very kind heart that sees the good in people. Sadly though, that’s not how life is. What you did for my nephews can only be termed as sacrificial giving. I’m not able to pay you as much as you deserve, but I’m most grateful.”

“I better check on the boys now, they have the tendency to call out for me in the night and if I’m not close by, we might be subjected to some yelling.”

Errol stood up when Lillian did and stepped closer. He took her hand and she felt her heart beating rapidly. “You’re a very precious woman, Miss Craig and I’m happy that you’re here.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said breathlessly. “I have to go now.”

“You do that,” Errol let her go, for he didn’t really trust himself at that moment. The temptation to pull her closer and rest his chin on the top of her head was great, but he didn’t want to frighten her away. The boys and by extension Lilly Craig were the only ones who made his life worthwhile. He watched as she hurried out of the room, then sat down once again and held his head in his hands. What was he going to do about his complex situation?

Seeking Refuge

“Miss Craig, I’ve summoned you here at this late hour because I’d like to tell you that things are really getting out of hand here in Dorchester,” Errol paced the length of his study. “It’s getting so bad that even some of my tenants are joining in, which means I’m losing the respect I had with my people. That’s the worst thing anyone should ever have to endure, loss of respect from one’s own subjects.”

“I’m very sorry that things are so bad, my lord.” He’d woken her up in the wee hours of the morning.

“The best solution is for us to leave for London immediately. Our family house isn’t the best because it’s in an old part of the city, at least we shall have some respite there.”

“What will happen to the estate?”

“One or two loyal servants will take care of things until we’re able to return, which I hope will be someday soon.” He paused and put his hands in his pockets. “My brother Alfred and I always said that we would never bring our children up in London, and that’s what I really want for these boys. They have to know that they’re responsible for the tenants on the estate and they can only learn that by living among their people. London has its attractions but any good landlord knows that for his estate to flourish, he has to be present most of the time.”

“Lady Carol loved the countryside,” Lilly said. “When I joined her household, she told me that she loved Sleepers’ Haven because it was so far removed from the loud towns and that was where she wanted her sons to be brought up. She also talked of taking them to Eton when they were older,” her tone fell. “It’s so sad that she won’t be here to see what fine boys her sons will grow up to be.”

“I’ll honour her memory and also my brother’s by being a good

guardian to the boys. They love you so much and my prayer is that you'll be with us for a long time."

"I'll have to leave some day, when you get a duchess. Her ladyship may have her own ideas of a governess for the boys. In the meantime, I'll do my best for them, sir."

"That's all I ask."

* * *

If Errol thought that by fleeing Dorchester the rumours would stop, he was grossly mistaken. As soon as he arrived in London, he was summoned to the Regent's court and that's when he knew that he was in trouble.

The Regent wouldn't even see him, but asked Lord Phillip Cobble, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to conduct the interview or more like an interrogation. He was considered the Regent's right hand man and being in his good graces would be advantageous for Errol and his estate.

"Errol," the middle aged man stretched his hand out when Errol was announced into his office. "It's good to see you boy, and I was very sorry to learn of your father's untimely death. Lord George was a good man."

"Thank you, sir, you're very kind." Though Lord Phillip was his peer, Errol respected him first because of his age and also because of his position. The chancellor was being very generous with his words because everyone knew that Errol's father, the late duke had been a gambler and an alcoholic who squandered his estate. Errol always excused his behaviour because his father had gone to pieces when his mother died. He'd never recovered nor stopped grieving for her.

"Please sit, would you like anything to drink?" He rang the small bell and a servant came in.

Errol was thirsty but he didn't want to choke on anything. He was so nervous that he wasn't sure his hands could hold anything steadily. But it would be considered rude for him to decline, so he

nodded. "A cup of tea, thank you."

Lord Phillip watched the young man and sympathized with him. He really was a good sort of fellow, quiet and hardworking if what he'd heard was true, but the rumours had to be looked into. The Prince Regent was seeking men of good repute to add to his panel of advisors and they'd been considering the Duke of Dorchester when someone mentioned that things weren't going so well with him.

Once the tea was served and the servants had left, Lord Phillip cleared his throat. He was known to be a very straightforward man who never beat around the bush. "Some nasty rumours have reached the Regent's ears and I wanted to find out what is really happening. What's going on, Errol?"

"My lord, if it has to do with the children in my care, I'd like to say that it's an unfortunate incident, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"Six years ago, my brother Alfred was engaged to Lady Caroline Sanders and just a few days before their wedding, she called it off and soon married Lord Brian Worthington. They moved to Sleepers' Haven where they lived relatively quiet lives and soon after, my brother died under tragic circumstances. When Lady Caroline broke off their engagement, he was so distraught that he took to the bottle. Just a few weeks ago, I received a letter from the Vicar of Sleepers' Haven, informing me that Lady Carol had appointed me as her sons' guardian in the event of her death. I traveled to Exeter and was shocked to find that the twins resembled my late brother. That's when the vicar told me that her ladyship had confessed to him that the boys were my brother's offspring. Apparently, when she discovered that she was with child and informed him, he wasn't immediately receptive and she didn't want to bring shame to her family name, so she accepted Lord Brian's suit."

"So the rumours that you had an adulterous affair with a married woman and sired her children isn't true?"

"It isn't true, my lord."

Lord Phillip grunted softly. "I'll have to look into all this and inform the Regent accordingly. Meanwhile, keep a low profile and this will

soon blow over. The truth has a way of coming out in the end, so have no fear. You'll be vindicated one day soon. And in any case, what does it matter? You're now the father of those two boys, even though in your case you were shoved into unexpected fatherhood." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Am I to deduce then that your engagement to Lady Abigail Wentworth is now over?"

"Yes, sir. It's unfortunate that my lady and I won't be getting married after all."

"You're both still young and I'm sure you'll make good matches in the end."

"That's very kind of you to say, sir."

* * *

Even though he'd found a gentle ear with the chancellor, Errol was still upset about the rumours and especially because they'd followed them to London. He couldn't go anywhere without someone raising the issue. But when Lilly returned from an outing to the park with the boys one morning, looking clearly upset, he knew it was time to put a stop to everything.

"What happened?"

Lilly shook her head and pointed at the boys with her chin. Errol nodded; she didn't want the children upset and he respected that. But he wasn't about to let it go so he waited until he was sure that she had put the boys down for the night and sent his valet to fetch her from her room.

"My lord, you sent for me?"

"Indeed I did," he sat down in the shabby chair in his small study. He missed Dorchester because he didn't much like the small town house. It was supposed to be just a temporary dwelling place when he was in London on business, not a long term abode. "Now please tell me why you were so upset this morning."

"It's really nothing."

"You can't say that and yet someone clearly offended you. Don't worry, I won't go to their doorstep and challenge them to a duel, if that's what you fear." Lilly smiled and he nodded. "That's more like it. Now tell me."

"The boys and I were in the park when three or four women came up to us and started asking me very disturbing questions. They made a lot of insinuations and I'm afraid I may have been rather rude to them, before bringing the boys home."

"I just wish I knew who they were, but have no fear, they will soon send their notes of complaints to the house." He rested his elbows on the desk and held his head. "Will this nightmare never end?"

"I should have been more careful and polite, sir. I'm sorry."

"Don't ever apologize for defending your charges, Miss Craig. In any case, they attacked you first. Just try to keep your head down."

"We'll only play in the backyard from now on, so that we don't have to meet with nasty people like those again."

"Good girl." He leaned back and a faraway look came into his eyes. "I wish I could take you and the boys and flee into exile, and return many years from now when all these nasty rumours have ended."

Lilly shook her head. "That would be a very unwise thing to do, my lord."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Rumours are like a blazing fire when they happen, but at some point even the fiercest of fire dies down. Something else will come up and people will forget all about this family. You just need to bear it for a few more days and then all will be well."

"You're sure?"

"I've lived in London most of my life and I know it for a fact. Many people are idle and need something to do, so they find joy in spreading nasty rumours. But soon, some other scandal comes up and they move on. My lady used to refer to rumour mongers as locusts that invade a place, sweep it clean and move on. She would say that even though locusts devastated the land, there was always the hope for a new beginning. So, even though this family will be

hurt by the rumours, there's hope for newness again. You'll be vindicated, my lord."

Newness Of Life

He was in love and though it frightened him a little, it also made him smile. For the first time in his life, Errol Campbell was really in love. And with his nephews' governess of all people! He could just imagine what London would have to say to that.

A few months ago, he may have scoffed at the idea of a nobleman like him falling in love with a commoner but now that it had happened to him, he understood. Love had no bounds and could strike anyone. In his case, it had happened subtly without his being aware of it. Spending time with Lilly and the boys because they were practically under house arrest for a few weeks made him finally admit that she was the woman he wanted by his side forever. She never complained even when their fare wasn't all that pleasant. She taught the boys how to sing and laugh and he began doing the same too.

Just like she'd predicted, a new scandal soon had the attention diverted to the new unfortunate subjects. A marquis, married and the father of four sons had put his wife's sister in the family way and the two ladies were tearing each other to shreds in public.

When he told Lilly of the incident, she shook her head sadly, "It's terrible for sisters to do that to each other. Their fight is being fuelled by opportunists but they're too blinded by anger to see that. I just pray that they will soon come to their senses and mend their torn relationship before it's too late."

Lilly was really an angel, his angel. The past few weeks would have been unbearable without her but she found a way of making him smile. He needed to tell her that he loved her, praying that she wouldn't bolt. He was sure that she loved him though she was probably intimidated by his title and position. Reaching for the small bell on the table at his side, he rang it and she soon appeared. Since the only other servants present in the house were elderly,

Lilly had taken over some of the work too.

“My lord?”

“Please come in and sit down.”

Lilly’s heart was pounding. Had she done something wrong? Lord Errol rarely summoned her unless there was a matter to be discussed. But he looked almost happy and her heartbeat slowed down somewhat. “Yes, your grace?”

Errol stood up and came around his desk, sitting on the chair opposite hers. He reached out for her hands. “I’m sure you know what I want to tell you.”

She shook her head. “No,” but it came out all hoarse, causing him to chuckle softly.

“My dear girl, you’re blushing so delightfully,” he rubbed the backs of her hands with his thumbs. “I don’t like to prolong matters so I’ll just say it. I love you, Lillian Craig. I’ve fallen in love with you.”

‘Oh!’

“Is that all you can say?” He smiled gently at her.

“My lord....”

“Errol.”

“Errol.”

“I like how you say my name.” He raised her hands and kissed them both. “You were saying something?”

“Errol, your station and mine are so different. What will people say?”

“Haven’t you been the one who keeps telling me that I shouldn’t worry what people will say? Dear heart, you’ve made me see that it’s not about titles and society, but about you and me. I know that I don’t want to spend another day without you in my life.”

“We barely know each other.”

“Excuses my love?” He leaned forward and brushed his lips gently against hers. “I know that I’m in love with you and people have

already said the worst they can about me, about us. What matters is how we feel about each other.” He raised her chin. “Do you have feelings for me little one?”

Tears welled up in her eyes and he pulled her into his arms and Lilly soon found herself seated on his lap. “Don’t cry.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“That you love me and once you say it, you’ll feel better.”

Lilly was deeply in love with the duke and she’d wept into her pillow many nights at the hopelessness of it all. Now to find that he loved her was too much and she didn’t know how to react to it all. It made her so happy but also humbled her that such a man as the duke would be willing to come down to her level.

“What are you thinking?”

“It’s humbling that you would come down to your handmaid’s level, my lord.”

“Lilly, man is created equal but situations cause us to be born in different stations. The wonder of life is that the base born and the nobles are conceived in the same way, born in the same way and though they live differently, will all die and descend into the earth. We come with nothing in this world and though we eventually possess much, when we leave, we leave naked as we came. It’s a humbling thought. Love happens to kings and paupers, princes and vagabonds, and everyone else in between; not that I’m referring to you in a derogatory manner.”

“I understand what you’re saying.”

“Please put me out of my misery dear girl. Tell me that you love me and my heart will settle down.”

She smiled so sweetly at him that it caught his breath. This woman was so lovely and innocent, yet there was an underlying strength within her that made him know he’d received a great blessing. By falling in love with her, he knew that he’d made the right choice. “Yes, Errol, I do love you so very much.”

It All Ends Well

“Will you stand still, Stephen,” Errol’s voice was full of exasperation and the little boy giggled. His brother was seated quietly on the bed watching them. “If the two of you want to see me married to my beloved Lillian today, then you have to stand still as I tie this cravat around your little neck.”

“Cravat, cravat,” Henry chanted out the new word.

“Yes, and in a few years time you’ll be tying your own and going out to dazzle the poor ladies.”

“Uncle Errol?”

“Yes Stephen?”

“If you marry Miss Lillian, will she become our mother?”

“Yes, dear boy.”

“And you will be our father?”

Errol nearly choked on the lump that welled up in his throat. He’d longed for the day when the boys would see him as their father and not merely their uncle. “Yes,” he said in a hoarse voice. The wisdom of five years olds!

“Uncle Errol,” Henry piped up. “Can we start calling you papa today?”

“Come here,” he held out his hands and hugged the two boys tightly, blinking rapidly so the tears wouldn’t fall. “I love you both so much and it will be an honour if you called me Papa or Father.”

Lilly was a radiant bride and once again, Errol found himself fighting back his tears. Love had a way of turning a man’s insides all mushy and he knew that for as long as he lived, he would love this woman and these two boys who’d brought so much joy into his

life. He'd told her that he had nothing to offer her except his heart and love, and she'd responded by telling him that it was all that she wanted and had prayed for. He was indeed a very blessed man.

Theirs was a simple wedding for they didn't have much, but the love they shared was so great that it superseded anything else. They returned to a simple meal prepared by the cook and as they were about to sit down and partake of it, the door bell rang.

"I'll get it," Errol stood up for he'd given his valet and butler the day off so he could be alone with his bride. He returned a few minutes later holding a thick envelope in his hand. "Someone just delivered this, and it's from Littleton and Applegate Solicitors. Never heard of them."

"There's only one way to find out, open it."

Errol opened the envelope with trembling hands, expecting to find a summons to appear or show cause why legal action shouldn't be taken against him. He read the first few sentences and sat down heavily, a stunned look on his face.

"What is it, my love?" Lilly was immediately at his side. "What do they want?"

"These solicitors represent the late Lord Brian Worthington. Apparently, they've been looking for me because of his estate."

"Lord Worthington's estate was all destroyed in the fire."

"No, that was just one of his properties. The man was very wealthy and yet lived very simply. According to this letter, he had vast business interests in India and had been in the process of winding up his affairs when the tragedy befell him and his wife. Carol and these boys were named as his sole heirs and in the event of their deaths, the person named as the boys' guardian would be their trustee."

"Oh!"

"Lord Worthington was a very wealthy man and the solicitors have asked me to present myself at their offices with the boys, so they can hand everything necessary over to me. There's a town house mentioned in Regent Square too."

“Oh my!” Lilly had passed by the square on one of her hurried trips to church but without the boys of course, and had admired the beautiful houses which belonged to the wealthy families of London.

Errol looked at his nephews who were unaware of what was going on, happily eating their simple meal. They were his family now and he’d been vindicated.

“You and these little ones have brought me so much grace and blessings, Lilly.” He stood up and pulled her close. “You’re my angels. Now we’ve been vindicated for the letter states that as guardian and trustee, there’s a large sum I’m to receive to see to my own affairs so that I’ll be able to concentrate on the boys.”

“Lord Brian was a worthy man though I didn’t know him for long.”

“He must have loved Carol to do this for her and her sons.”

“Love has a way of wanting to do the best for others.”

And Errol silently agreed for he’d prayed to find a way to show Lilly how much he loved her by providing well for her and his nephews. Now he could do it without any strain and finally he was free.

“Right at this moment I wish you could tear my heart open and see the love that is in there for you.”

“You’re making me feel very self conscious, my lord.”

“I’m your husband and you still call me by title.”

“Errol,” Lilly smiled. She was loved and she loved back. This thing called love was wonderful and she prayed that she would make her lord and husband happy for the rest of her life. Errol was thinking the very same thing and in years to come, that’s exactly what they did.

* * *

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Taming the Lady

Clean Regency Romance

From Grace To Grass

"I could just scream," Lady Abigail Wentworth clenched her teeth in frustration. She hurled her hair brush across the room, hitting and cracking the mirror on the opposite wall. That only made her angrier and soon her bedroom resembled a battle field.

"How could he do this to me," she screamed at no one in particular because the servants in her father's house knew to keep their distance when she was in one of her rages. "Who does that man think he is, duke or not. He will pay for this slight against my family name," she finished by throwing herself across her bed. She sobbed for a moment, wondering what had gone wrong with her life.

One moment, she was telling everyone about her upcoming wedding, and the next moment she was cancelling the engagement. She was now the laughing stock of Dorchester County for everyone said she couldn't hold on to a fiancé, let alone a husband.

Lord Errol Campbell had chosen his brother's illegitimate sons over her and it hurt deeply. She'd thought that the man was ensnared and enraptured with her, but she'd been wrong. All was going well until those blasted children came into Errol's life.

"Aargh!" Her fists pummelled the pillow. "Why did those boys have to come into our lives?" By now she would have been married to the most handsome man in Dorchester, if not the whole of England but here she was, unmarried and all alone. She couldn't imagine that her beloved Errol would eventually belong to another woman, that governess no doubt. It infuriated her that a little miss nobody was going to take her place and become a duchess.

There was a knock at her door and she ignored it at first, but the person persisted. "Come in," she screamed and the door opened to reveal a middle aged man with a shock of white hair on his head. "Oh Papa," she scrambled off the bed and into his arms. "I'm so

sad.”

“My princess,” he held her close. “Do you need some more money for shopping, or shall I take you to Paris?” Lord Thomas Wentworth loved his daughter, perhaps too much as his wife had complained years ago. But his little girl was motherless now and he did all he could to make sure she was happy. She was his only child and his world.

“Papa,” she pulled back. “It’s not always about money, shopping and trips,” she said.

“What does my little princess want? Mention anything and I’ll get it for you.”

“Oh Papa,” she sank down on her bed. “I want Errol.”

“My love, he doesn’t deserve you for the way he treated you. You’ll find a good man who will treat you right and will be worthy of you. Now, cheer up and come with me to the theatre. There’s a good girl and your papa won’t take no for an answer. Shall I send for a new gown for you, my dear?”

“Oh Papa, it’s too late for a new gown now.”

* * *

Lieutenant David Birch’s right leg hurt so badly that he nearly passed out from the pain, but he grit his teeth and lowered himself to the ground, leaning against a fencing post. He was here but the effort of rising up and getting to the gate and beyond was more than he could manage so he just sat and rubbed his leg, moaning softly.

Desperation had made him take this journey back home, even though he’d vowed never to return to the one place that gave him a lot of pain especially these past few years. Losing his mother three years ago was the worst thing he’d ever gone through and he didn’t think he would get over it. When he lost his father just two months later, life had changed drastically for the young man. That meant his brother Edward had taken over as the Duke of Somerset. Being the second son, he was glad his father had bought him a

commission in the army as he didn't stand to inherit anything and had to make his own way in life.

He closed his eyes tiredly, willing the pain to subside so he could make his way to the house where he doubted that he would be welcome. Since he had nowhere to go, he would bear with his sister-in-law's snide remarks about him; just as long as they gave him a roof and something to eat once in a while. He needed a little time to recuperate and rest his injured leg. Once he was up and around again, he would be gone from their lives for good.

Lately, he'd been toying with the idea of asking for a posting to the colonies abroad so that he didn't have to put up with his relatives. It was sad that Edward was his only sibling and yet they'd never got along from when they were young. Sometimes, David was tempted to blame his parents for his brother's haughtiness. From when Edward could walk, their parents had made him aware that he was to be the next duke and treated him as such, expecting everyone else to do the same. Even David was forced to follow suit such that by the time they were teenagers, Edward treated him worse than even the servants.

David had begun rebelling silently but since he didn't want to hurt his mother's feelings, had borne the treatment in silence. But when his mother died and Edward didn't even come for the funeral, citing other personal interests, his father finally admitted that perhaps they'd done a poor job of raising the next Duke of Somerset. He was selfish and cared nothing for anyone else save his beautiful new bride. David tried to get his brother to pay attention to whatever was going on at the estate but by then it was too late. Edward instead started making unreasonable demands on his father, who was grieving for his beloved wife. The young man didn't seem to notice their father's failing health and it was left to David to do all he could to smooth things over.

Mercifully, just two weeks before his death, the duke had bought David an army commission and the latter was glad to leave home, only returning to bury his father a few days later. For two years, David hadn't been home and he wondered how his brother was faring with his new bride, Lady Camille.

From the moment David had met Camille, just a short time before

their mother passed away, he felt that she was more of a social climber than anything else. She was the daughter of a baron but her father didn't have money or influence. Camille had wheedled her way into Edward's life and because she was beautiful, he had succumbed to her charms. Edward loved showing off and having one of the most beautiful women in England as his wife, thinking it made him welcome in many households.

David sighed and struggled to his feet, favouring his injured leg. The doctor who had removed the shrapnel from his leg had advised him to use a walking stick but he didn't want anyone considering him an invalid. He would walk again, even if it was the last thing he ever did.

One of the servants spotted him as he walked up the driveway and came running to help him with his small valise. "Master David, welcome home."

"Thank you, Lionel," he was trying hard not to show that he was in pain, even though his face was pale from the effort of walking. "How is everybody at home?"

"My lord and lady are out for the weekend," the servant said. "They went to the coast for some sunshine because his grace has been feeling poorly lately."

It was the best news David could have received. "When will my brother be back?"

"The duchess said they would return on Tuesday in the afternoon."

"Very well then," David was so happy. He would have at least three days of uninterrupted bliss on the estate before his sister-in-law came and would probably drive him out. She had once told him that he was a burden to the estate and should find somewhere to go. Well, he would rest as much as possible for three days and by the time they returned, would have decided what to do with his life.

The Shocking Truth

“Don’t you think you’ve taken things too far, Abby?” Lady Lucy Biddlecombe asked her friend. They were age mates but the former was married to a marquis. She was a pretty looking lady who seemed to be settling down well in her new role as a wife.

“I haven’t done enough, Lucy,” Abby hissed. “Errol made me the laughing stock of Dorchester and he thinks he can just get away with it? I’ll show him that he made a big mistake when he took in his brother’s brats.”

Lucy shook her head slowly. “Let it go, will you? There are many other young men who are quite interested in you and they’re all unencumbered by family ties. Leave Errol alone, for if you’re not aware, he got married about three weeks ago.”

“What?” That was news to Abby. “Who did he marry? I didn’t read about it in the papers.” Abby was so shocked and dismayed but didn’t want Lucy to know how deeply her words had affected her. She couldn’t believe that Errol was gone from her life for good. It couldn’t be true, there must be some mistake. “Are you sure of what you’re saying, Lucy?”

Lucy nodded. “They had a private wedding and I understand he married the young lady who was taking care of his nephews.”

“That common nobody?”

Lucy observed her friend for a while, feeling sorry for her. The so called ‘nobody’ had married one of the most handsome and distinguished men in England, but she was wise enough not to make that comment out loud. “In any case, they’re married.”

“Society will reject him,” it stung that Errol could have cast her aside for a mere governess. “What kind of marriage will they have anyway? She’s so poor and has nothing, and Errol also has nothing. His estate is dilapidated and he needs to marry someone with

money.”

“Well, let’s stop talking about those two,” Lucy changed the subject because she didn’t want to tell her friend that the people she despised were now doing very well. Because of the twins, Errol was now able to restore his estate. He had moved his family into the town house left by Lord and Lady Worthington since he was their legal guardian. It was one of those houses that everyone admired and wanted to receive an invitation to, but so far the Duke and Duchess of Dorchester weren’t entertaining. They preferred to lead a quiet life away from the limelight. Lucy didn’t blame them for one moment, for they had suffered when terrible rumours were going around London about them.

Now, they kept mostly to themselves and even though a few patrons had started inviting them to functions, they were very selective. That made people all the more curious about the couple. Errol defended and protected his wife from society and getting them to open up was going to take a while. Lucy wouldn’t have minded being counted among their acquaintances for it was rumoured that the Worthingtons had been very wealthy. Now that Errol was the boys’ guardian and trustee of their parents’ estate, he was no doubt handling big business. More than that, Daniel her own husband had informed her that the Prince Regent was considering adding Errol Campbell to his list of personal advisors which meant great favour indeed.

Abbey would have been one of those duchesses that society admired and invitations to her balls and parties would have been much sought after. That usurper had taken her place and she wasn’t going to let things go as Lucy expected her to. Errol belonged to her and she would do all she could to get him back.

“If I want to, I can snatch Errol back from that commoner,” Abby said haughtily. “After all, he was deeply in love with me,” she raised her nose up and Lucy sighed inwardly. She’d met Errol and his new wife, Lillian at the Regent’s court and had been struck at how much in love they were. Though Lady Lillian was simple, she was elegant and what really made Lucy pay attention to the couple was that Errol was genuinely happy. No pretentiousness and false airs, he looked really contented. Errol could barely let his wife out of his sight and when they looked at each other, their love was

palpable.

“Do you really want to do that?” She didn’t want her friend humiliated for that was bound to happen if she pursued her current course of action.

“Why not? Errol was mine and I want him back.”

“Weren’t you the one who broke off the engagement because of his nephews? In any case, Errol is now well placed because of those two boys. Perhaps you’re now regretting why you acted hastily.”

“Don’t say that, Lucy,” Abby knew her friend was right but she didn’t want to hear the words said out loud. “If Daniel had brought in some children from nowhere, would you have agreed to marry him?”

“I would have found out more first, before rejecting the children and subsequently him,” Lucy retorted.

“You’re a better person than me, Lucy,” Abby saw that her friend wasn’t too pleased at her comment and wanted to calm her down. Truthfully, Lucy was the only close friend she had as she felt everyone else was judging her for not being married. “Will you help me get Errol back?”

“No, my dear. Daniel would be most annoyed if I tried to run interference in other people’s lives. You know how strict my husband is.”

“You don’t have to tell him anything.”

Lucy shook her head. “You know that I could never hide anything from my husband.” Lord Daniel Biddlecombe, was one of the Prince Regent’s close aides and a very serious individual, but loving towards his wife. Lucy was in love with her husband and never wanted to anger or disappoint him in any way. “Please, for your own sake just let Errol be. Daniel said he’s able to introduce you to some fine young men. We’re having Percy and his sisters over for lunch this coming Sunday, why don’t you come and meet him?”

“Are you by any chance referring to Percival Eldridge the son of a merchant?”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing. He comes from the gentry class and

their family is very wealthy, Abby. Percy and Daniel were at Eton together and my husband says he's a wonderful man and has asked about you once or twice."

"Why would I want to marry someone who has no title?" Abby scoffed and Lucy felt pity for her delusional friend. When would Abby grow up?

* * *

It took him only twenty four hours to decide what he was going to do, but David stayed in the family manor until Tuesday when his brother and sister-in-law returned. Though Edward pretended to be glad to see him, Camille didn't waste any emotions on him.

"So you decided that this is where you want to come and recuperate?" She asked unkindly. "Well, we're expecting guests and have no room."

David nearly laughed out loud but kept a straight face. "I'm sorry, is this any way to welcome your long lost brother-in-law back, dear sister?"

Camille curled her upper lip in disdain. "How much money do you want this time?"

"Just a little to help me find some rooms and be out of your hair," he didn't want to reveal his plans to his family because he felt that they didn't deserve any explanation from him.

"I'll see to it," she said. "Just don't become a bother to your brother. He hasn't been well lately and I don't want him stressed at all."

David nodded, watching as his sister-in-law left the drawing room. He turned to look at his brother who had been quiet during their exchange. Edward looked a little pale and there was something like regret in his eyes.

"You look poorly; didn't spending a few days at the coast do you any good?"

"I'll be alright," Edward said breathlessly, his voice raspy. David frowned. His brother didn't look well at all. He seemed to be under some stress but experience had taught David not to bother asking for he wouldn't receive a satisfactory answer.

"Has the doctor seen you?"

"Camille thinks it's just something that will soon clear up. Frankly, I don't see the need of troubling myself to bring in the doctor when it will pass. Must be the chills or something minor like that."

David wanted to argue but thought better. After all, his brother was an adult and if he chose not to see a doctor for his ailment, who was he to try and insist?

Edward cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about Camille, but she's invited her friends and family for two weeks and we don't have much room."

"Don't worry yourself, brother. I've always taken care of myself and will be alright. All I need is some money to tide me over for the next few weeks as I recuperate. The doctor in Paris told me to rest this leg as much as possible and I can't go out in search of work, much as I'd like to. So, if it's possible for you to give me something little to add to the pension that I receive, I'll be very grateful."

"I'll ask Camille to give you some money."

"Thank you," David turned to leave the room.

"Wait," Edward called out and he turned. "When do you think you'll be gone?" He laughed embarrassedly. "I don't want to hurry you, but everything has to be perfect for this visit."

"Very well, I'll be gone first thing tomorrow morning."

"That's good. I'll make sure Camille settles you with something before you leave."

David just nodded and turned away, and missed seeing the sadness in his brother's eyes.

Pride Comes Before A Downfall

"I don't believe it," Lucy said breathlessly, staring at the large diamond ring on Abby's finger. "Count Emile Martineau, London's most sought after bachelor."

Abby was glowing; she couldn't believe that she had managed to get the handsome and dandy French nobleman to propose to her. They'd met at Almack's courtesy of one of the patronesses. Abby held an annual voucher which her father had purchased for her and she felt that she had met the right man for her. Errol paled in comparison to the fiery French man who made her feel breathless all the time. It didn't matter that he was much older than she was, actually it added to the allure of their relationship.

Women envied her and men strove to emulate the Frenchman who was one of the best dressed men of the season. He was flamboyant and when he had singled her out, Abby had been thrilled but remembered what Lucy had told her some time ago. *"When you meet a man who catches your eye, don't act silly and childish like the other young women. Be aloof and let him pursue you. It will make him the more determined to win your hand. That's what I did and see how I married one of the best men in England."*

So, Abby had acted aloof and when Emile wouldn't stop pursuing her, she'd known Lucy was right. Within days, he announced that he was completely besotted and love sick and his flowery poems convinced her that she had indeed found herself a worthy partner.

"When is the wedding?"

"Emile doesn't want to wait for long," Abby had stars in her eyes and Lucy was slightly concerned. Like any other female, she appreciated Emile's looks and manner of dressing but he seemed to be too good to be true. "Emile says he'll die of love if I keep him waiting any longer."

“Have you met any of his family yet?”

“When we’re married, we will make the trip to Normandy where his family is waiting for us.” She grabbed Lucy’s hands. “Oh Lucy, I’m so happy,” she was smiling broadly. “Emile is such a handsome man, he’s rich and just makes my heart melt within me.”

“Be careful and guard your virtue,” Lucy warned. “Don’t get so carried away that you give in to his seduction.”

“I would never do that,” Abby said indignantly and for that, Lucy was glad. She’d seen many young girls and some of her friends included, succumbing to a man’s wiles and things didn’t end very well for them. A few had to elope to Gretna Green before evidence of their indiscretions came to light and their marriages weren’t happy ones.

“Be very careful not to allow the gentleman to seduce you. You’re young and he’s mature and very experienced in these matters. Don’t let your guard down even for a moment.”

“I promise you that I won’t.”

* * *

Abby was to remember her friend’s words later and was most grateful that with all her foolishness, her virtue had remained intact. Emile had tried to make her give in to his charm but on that she’d held firm. Believing herself to be so much in love, she hadn’t questioned when he insisted on meeting her father and charming his way into the baron’s good graces.

Because Abby didn’t like bothering herself with serious matters, saying it was men’s domain, she was happy to let Emile spend a lot of time with her father while she shopped for her trousseau. Everything had to be perfect for her wedding day and she’d thought she was the luckiest girl alive when Emile threw a very lavish engagement party for her. To be honest, her father had met the expenses of the engagement because Emile said his money was tied up in his bank in Paris. He had promised to reimburse all expenses as soon as the bank cleared his funds. That alone should have alerted Abby to the fact that all was not well but she was

too caught up in the euphoria of her upcoming society wedding to pay attention to her intuition.

Everyone who was somebody was invited to the engagement party and her father was so happy. To slight Errol and his ordinary wife, Abby had announced to all and sundry that they'd practically begged her for an invitation. And then her world came crashing down just days later.

Now as she sat beside her father's casket, tears pouring down her eyes, Abby couldn't believe just how terribly things had gone. It had taken Emile Martineau three days to destroy their lives and she didn't know how she was going to ever face anyone in society again.

Two days before her much publicized wedding, Abby had gone to seek out her beloved at his rooms at the Grand Royal Hotel on Regency Street and received the shock of her life. He had fled sometime in the night, taking all her jewels with him. The previous day, he'd asked to see them and claimed that they were dull and needed polishing. In love and fully trusting him, Abby had handed over all her precious jewels as well as those inherited from her mother and grandmother. Now Emile was nowhere to be found and she realized that she'd been the victim of a master conman. How hadn't she seen through his mask?

What made her breakdown further, was coming home that same day to find her father looking as white as a sheet. He was holding some documents in his hands and his solicitor was present.

"Abby, you've killed me," he'd said hoarsely before crumbling to the ground in a dead faint. He never recovered and six hours later, the doctor pronounced him dead.

In the time that her father was unconscious and being attended to by his personal physician, Abby had found out from Mr. Pearson the solicitor that Emile had convinced her father to invest heavily in his ventures. He'd even taken out a huge overdraft from the bank to finance some of those ventures.

"That man promised your father wealth beyond anything he'd ever seen, and I'm afraid, Lord Wentworth put everything he owned into those shady ventures."

It was like being caught up in a horrible dream and overnight, Abby's safe and secure world was no more. Creditors had swarmed the house and she watched in disbelief as everything of value, including her family home was taken over in order to settle her father's debts.

"You have less than a week to find somewhere to live," the solicitor had told her just that morning as she prepared her father's body for burial. "This house now belongs to someone else."

It was a cold and rainy afternoon when Lord Thomas Wentworth was laid to rest beside his wife in the family tomb and Abby felt that her own life was also over. The people who attended her father's burial seemed to be mocking her and she couldn't trust anyone ever again. They were laughing at her and others blamed her for her father's death. Even Lucy who'd hitherto been close to her, hurried away after the burial, clearly not wanting to spend a single moment longer with her.

It hurt and Abby just wanted to die. How could she face society again, knowing that her own foolishness had brought about this catastrophe? Her beloved father had died, when it had emerged that the investments he'd made weren't even worth the paper they were written on. Emile had wiped them clean and left them holding ashes in their hands.

What was she going to do now?

Surprising Events

David sat in the small inn reading news of the latest scandal that had rocked London. The effects were reverberating all around the country and people were stunned at how a noble woman had been deceived by a conman and lost all her inheritance.

“Lady Abigail Wentworth,” David twisted his lips. Fate had played a cruel trick on the woman but she deserved what had come to her, he thought. Just a few weeks before, he’d read about his good friend and school mate and the shame that had come to his family after Lady Abigail broke off their engagement.

Lord Errol Campbell had been scorned by society and David had hurt for his friend. When he sent him a note to console him, Errol had written and told him that out of the shame and pain, he’d found true love and he was married to one of the most beautiful and kind women in the whole world. Her name was Lillian and when he came to London, would he look in on them?

David didn’t want to face his friends while his own life was lying in tatters. He didn’t want to see their pitying looks or the long awkward silences as people desperately thought about what to say. No, he wasn’t going to let anyone pity him because he was determined to make it in life. He had his army pension and though little, it would tide him for a long time.

Leaving the family estate a few weeks ago because of his sister-in-law, he’d rented two rooms at a small but comfortable inn and his leg was healing nicely. Camille had given him a few pounds and he’d accepted the offering with gratitude and left home, promising that the next time he returned, he would be a successful man. He would go to the colonies and make his fortune, then return and buy an estate and settle down. That was his dream.

He read the article once again and felt something like pity for Lady Abigail. The tabloids called her proud and arrogant, putting her in a

terrible light. He wondered where she was and what she was doing because her family home and other properties had been repossessed to settle the huge debt that her father owed the bank. Apparently, Lord Wentworth had borrowed heavily from the bank to invest '*in mere air*' as one tabloid put it.

A French man had conned the Wentworths and they'd lost all their wealth, and the poor baron had also lost his life as a result of the shock he suffered. It was a terrible situation to be in and for a moment, David actually felt sorry for Lady Abigail. What was she going to do now? Then he shrugged, it was none of his business as he had his own issues to think about.

Living in the inn and getting additional treatment for his leg had eaten into whatever little money he had and he knew that he had to find a way out of London before he became the next scandal for inability to pay for his bed and board.

He sat lost in his thought, his memories taking him to happier times when he was younger and without a care in the world. Errol had made life so interesting for him, for he would insist on David accompanying him to their estate in Dorchester, where they would run wild and free, ride as much as they wanted and just enjoy life. They'd had good times and the last time he visited, just before the duchess died, Errol had told him that it was his home.

"Wherever you are, if you ever feel like you need a place to stay, just come home. I'll be waiting for you and there's always room for you here."

David nodded to himself. He was going to Dorchester, even though he knew his friend was living in London with his family. He would have the place to himself and wondered if there were any servants left to take care of things. Definitely there must be. Even though the tide had turned for Errol and he was now living in one of the much sought after areas of London, David was sure he still made time to visit his estate.

Once he was settled, he would write and tell David that he was staying at the manor for a few days just to regain strength and when he was ready, would be leaving for the colonies.

No one welcomed her, no one invited her into their homes and no one gave her as much as a simple cup of water. It hurt Abby so much that everyone she had considered to be a friend had turned their backs on her. Guilt tore at her as she finally faced what Errol had been through just a few months ago.

“This is my punishment,” she wept as she wandered aimlessly around the streets of London. She was so hungry and would have given anything just for a simple meal. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten, because she’d left home when the new owners came to take possession of the house. Truth be told, she had snuck away in the early hours of the morning. This was to escape the curious and mocking glances of those she knew would be waiting to witness her final humiliation. Being in a great hurry to get away, she hadn’t even thought about taking any of her expensive gowns for then she would have sold them and got some money for her upkeep.

The nights were the worst and she’d found a small alcove at St. Thaddeus Church where she was christened as a baby and that was her temporary dwelling for two days. If bandits and wicked men didn’t get her, the cold would certainly end her life. Abby couldn’t believe that just a few days ago, she’d been sleeping in a most comfortable bed and with servants ready to do her every bidding. Now here she was, destitute, homeless and hungry and with no relief in sight.

She couldn’t sleep at night because of the cold and fear of being attacked by someone. The hunger pangs almost drove her out of her mind but she was determined that she would find a way out of her current plight.

“Look out,” someone shouted but it was too late and she felt darkness overcoming her even as she felt a searing pain on her side.

When Abby came to, she was lying on a soft bed and covered with warm blankets and there was a fire burning merrily in the grate. Where was she? Then she felt the presence of other people and turned her head slowly, only to encounter the last person she ever

expected to see.

“How are you feeling?” Lillian asked their guest. “We’re sorry about the accident.”

“Accident?”

“Yes, my dear. You stepped right into the path of our carriage and our driver nearly ran you over. Mercifully, the wind flung you out of the way and we brought you home.”

Of course, this was Errol’s new home, actually it belonged to his nephews. She couldn’t believe that life could be so cruel to her and she quickly closed her eyes, willing the tears not to fall.

“Are you in pain?” She felt a gentle hand on her forehead. “The doctor said you don’t have any broken bones but will have aches and pains because of the bruising.”

“Thank you,” she said at last, humbled and deeply mortified to find herself indebted to the two people whose lives she’d set out to ruin just a few weeks ago. She couldn’t help the tears and soon found herself sobbing as she said how sorry she was, over and over again.

“Abby, we don’t hold anything against you,” Errol told her when she had somewhat calmed down, and this brought a fresh bout of weeping.

“Hush now,” Lillian was really concerned about their guest. When she’d been helping the maid to bathe her, she’d noticed how emaciated the poor girl was, as if she hadn’t had a meal for days. “When you’ve had something to eat, things won’t look so bleak.”

A Hostile Stranger

She was in Dorchester at the manor, a place she hadn't expected to ever return to. Yet this was going to be her home for the next few months as she sorted her life out. The beauty of it all was that it was quite secluded and apart from the old gardener and his wife who cleaned the house, the other servants were all in London taking care of their master.

Abby couldn't believe that Errol and Lillian had so kindly allowed her to use their home as a place of solace even after all she'd done to them. They had brushed her apologies aside, telling her not to worry about anything.

"It's a tough situation you are in right now, but things will get better somehow," Errol had told her. It was humbling to be their guest and be treated like a beloved sister, and not someone who had set out to ruin their lives. "Just take your time and sort your life out."

"You need a place that is out of the limelight so that you can have time to recuperate and also find refuge until all that is being said passes," Lillian told her. "Our home in Dorchester is there if you need it. Errol wants to tear down part of it and put up a better and sturdier structure but that won't be for another few months. We're waiting on an architect friend of his to return from Europe and then the renovations and restoration will begin. Meanwhile, you can stay there until you're ready to face the world again."

"How can I thank you for your kindness," she had wept as she held onto Lillian's hand. "I've never been so humiliated and rejected and it hurts terribly."

"I understand, but try not to dwell on your losses too much. You still have a good life ahead even though it doesn't seem like it right now. One day, you'll look back on this season of your life and realize that it is your turning point."

And indeed it was Abby's turning point. She'd spent hours seated at the window in the guest room just thinking about her future and past. Lillian had told her to be gentle with herself and forgive herself for making terrible mistakes. It was hard because she blamed herself for causing her father's death.

After a week of recuperating, she felt that she was ready to leave for Dorchester.

"Are you sure that you're ready to go now?"

"It's time that I grew up," she told Lillian, her smile was watery. "It has been a wakeup call for me and I remember my mama once telling me that wealth is fleeting and I should never place my trust in the things that I own." She shook her head. "I always thought Mama was strange because Papa was so wealthy," she choked on the words and cleared her throat. "My mother was a very simple woman. She had few gowns and the only things she had of value was the jewelery that my father gave her, which I lost," the pain tore at her heart. "How foolish I've been."

"You're only human and should be gentle and kind to yourself."

"I wish it was easy to just forget everything."

"You may never forget, but you will pass through and emerge on the other side," Lillian said. "Time has a way of healing our wounds and helping us accept our faults and mistakes. The secret, as my mother used to say, is to learn from every experience we go through and let it make us better people."

"You're so kind. My friends or those I thought were friends all turned their backs on me and wouldn't give me even a glass of water. Yet here you are even after I was so cruel to you. You and your husband opened the doors of your home to me, and have taken care of me. How will I ever repay your kindness?"

"Don't think about anything other than getting better and back on your feet. Errol told me to tell you that he will write you a letter to take to the village grocers so that if you need anything, they will provide and he will settle the accounts on a monthly basis."

It was mid afternoon when Abby entered Dorchester. She was in a covered carriage and though she could see people peering curiously at it as it passed, they couldn't see her. She couldn't bear their pitying looks and the shame that would follow when they saw and recognized her.

Old Paul Sims and his wife Rose were waiting for her and she realized that Errol must have sent them a message. They were one of the old servants who'd been with the family and she was surprised when they showed no contempt or disdain. Instead, they both had welcoming smiles on their faces as she got down from the carriage, which left a few minutes later.

"The master said you will be in the large guest room on the first floor. It's the best one since the others have already been stripped bare."

Abby had never lived in a house all alone, but she welcomed the solace. It would give her time to think and reflect on what she was going to do with her life. Now that she was here, she was determined not to be a burden to her hosts. They had no obligation at all to her, and she wasn't going to take advantage of their kindness. She would work for her living to prove to them that she was a changed woman now.

As she was settling down for a simple meal of bread, ham and warm milk, she heard the front door opening and thought it was Paul coming in. When she raised her eyes and encountered those of a stranger, her heart nearly stopped.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" She demanded, wishing Paul was close by but knowing that he was in his own cottage busy with his own chores. She'd told the couple that she could take care of herself and didn't need them waiting on her. The stranger looked frightening with his thick beard and fiery silverish eyes. "Who are you?"

"I should be asking the questions and not you," David said, placing his valise on the floor. "Who opened the door for you and what are you doing in Errol's house?"

“You know Errol?” Abby was surprised.

“We were at Eton together and he’s my friend. Again I ask you, what are you doing here when just a few weeks ago, you were running your mouth off and scandalizing my friend?”

Abby looked down as her face flamed. He was just a stranger but he knew her story and she wished the ground would open up and swallow her. His gaze held contempt and she knew that she deserved it.

“Well,” she raised her face. “Lillian is my friend and she allowed me to use their house until I get back on my feet again.”

“Oh yes, I heard about your father, and I’m sorry for your loss.”

Abby didn’t know whether the stranger was mocking her or his condolences were sincere. She could never really tell these things because for so long, people had only spoken what she wanted to hear. No one had ever told her the truth about anything for fear of her wrath.

“Thank you.”

“It was a really sad state of affairs, that man running off with your inheritance,” he sat down and stretched his leg.

Abby put her hands over her ears, “Please just stop,” tears welled in her eyes and she ran out of the room. David felt terrible at his callousness. It was just mean of him to attack her when she was so vulnerable. For her to have accepted help from Lillian and Errol meant that she was truly destitute! His friend was truly noble for giving refuge to Abby in her time of need, in spite of how things had ended between them.

With a sigh, he got to his feet and went in search of Abby. Her soft sobbing touched his heart even before he saw her as he entered the kitchen. She was leaning over the counter, wiping her eyes.

“I’m sorry, that was a mean thing for me to say. Please forgive me.”

Abby didn’t turn around but David’s voice sounded sincere, so she nodded.

“My name is David Birch and as I told you, Errol and I were in

school together. I spent most of my childhood here,” he looked around the now cold kitchen. “It’s always been home to me and I came here to recuperate. I didn’t expect anyone else to be here, well apart from one or two servants since I know that Errol and his family now live in London most of the time.”

Finding Common Ground

When David woke up the next day, it was nearly mid morning. He could hear the birds chirping cheerfully and downstairs, someone was singing softly. He lay back and listened but couldn't make out the words of the song. Still, it was a sweet voice and he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep once again.

He woke up around noon and did some stretching as the doctor had told him to do, and was surprised to find a pitcher of warm water waiting at the washing stand. He quickly cleaned up and went downstairs, finding Abby just setting the table.

"I didn't know if you would be awake before evening," she said shyly. "I'd made you some breakfast and now lunch is also ready."

"Thank you," the surprise in his voice had her smiling. The mighty Lady Abigail Wentworth was now doing household chores.

"I somehow learnt how to cook even though I didn't like it." She twisted her lips wryly. "Never knew the skills would one day come in handy."

"There's always a first time for everything," he shrugged, happy to have someone waiting on him but also cautious enough not to be drawn in by Abby's beautiful smile. She really was a lovely woman, if only she had a heart to go with it.

Abby sensed David's withdrawal and turned back to return to the kitchen where she'd been making pancakes. She'd found a little flour and Rosie so graciously brought her a few eggs, but she would go out in search of work today, so that she would never have to depend on anyone.

"Thank you for making breakfast and lunch for me," David said when Abby brought in some more pancakes. She merely nodded and left the dining room. He had to be careful not to be drawn in by that alluring smile, for Lady Abigail Wentworth was trouble. He'd

come here to recuperate and think about what he was going to do with the rest of his life. The last thing he needed was any kind of complication. It didn't occur to him that he was living in the large house with a woman, just the two of them. Society would frown on such living arrangements and declare that Abigail was ruined.

At that precise moment, that's what was running through Abby's mind. There was a scandal hovering over her head and if anyone was to find out that she was living in close proximity to a man who wasn't a relative, without a chaperone, there's no telling what else would be said about her. But she had nowhere to go and besides, the house was large enough for the two of them to avoid each other.

Abby was afraid of being judged because of her past and she knew that David was doing just that. It made her sad to know that she'd put good people through a lot of pain and humiliation, and yet they had opened their door for her when she needed help.

"I'll spend the rest of my life making restitution for my wicked ways," she murmured. The first thing she was going to do was to make sure that the house was in very good condition. Rosie had told her just that morning that she cleaned and dusted the house once a week because it would soon be torn down, at least most of it anyway.

"The master said we shouldn't bother too much with the place, but we have to earn our keep," Rosie had said. "My lady came and took away all the good items to the house in London. But when renovations are completed, those things will be returned."

"Whenever you need any help, please let me know."

"Yes, missy."

* * *

It was Rosie who directed her to the Armstrong family home. Though not nobility, they were wealthy gentry and according to the middle aged woman, the man was trying to buy himself a title. They had just bought a large manor that previously belonged to a

baron who died without descendants and they needed all the help they could get.

"I would go myself but my back isn't what it used to be."

"Let me find out what kind of jobs they have to offer," Abby replied.

"Most likely scullery maid or something like that. But I would be careful," Rosie observed Abby with a critical eye. "Charles Armstrong, the lord of the manor, is said to have a roving eye and beauty such as yours is bound to be noticed. Just be careful, child."

"Thank you for the warning."

As Abby walked up the driveway to the large imposing house, she was praying that there would be a job for her, out of the path of trouble. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to find out who she was. The shame of going to work for others when all her life she'd enjoyed the services of servants was too much. But she had to prove to herself more than anything that she had changed. "And David too," a small voice said and she silenced it. What did she care what David Firth thought of her? She'd only known the man for two days and here she was already trying to seek his approval.

Taking Rosie's advice, she'd donned an old bonnet that the former found for her among her clothes. Then she deliberately smudged her face with a little soot to hide the milky white skin. "You'll do," had been the best words she'd heard in a while, when Rosie nodded her approval. "Now you look like an ordinary scullery maid."

"But I am a servant."

Rosie shook her head. "I know nobility when I see it and you are no ordinary chit. I remember that you used to come by the estate when Lord Errol was here. Something must have happened to change your lot in life, but you're a noble woman through and through. Your clothes may not say it, but your bearing and speaking do so. Still, no matter what happens, never lose what you have inside."

There were a few other young ladies waiting in the courtyard at the back, obviously here for the job. When Mrs. Melinda Armstrong as she introduced herself came out, she looked at them all critically. "I might as well take you all in," she said haughtily. "You look like

you need the work and this large house needs cleaning from top to bottom.”

Abby was relieved when she was put to work in the kitchen, scrubbing pots and pans. But her relief was short lived because the cook was a nasty piece of work. She demanded to be addressed as Madam Hattie and was very free with her slaps and using a ladle to rap someone’s knuckles. Because she wasn’t used to the work, Abby’s hands were aching by the time evening came around and she was allowed to leave. She was subjected to further humility when her body was frisked thoroughly by the cook. She had rough calloused hands and it took Abby great effort not to show her revulsion at being treated thus.

“Can’t be too careful with you village girls,” Hattie said. “You love stealing the silver and I’m the one who will have to bear the brunt of it all should anything go missing. And no carrying any leftover food.” She took away the old apple that Abby had put in her apron pocket which she had intended to eat as she walked back home. It hurt to see Hattie dump the apple into the waste basket. “Go on now, and be here before light to start work tomorrow.”

Facing Reality

David couldn't believe that he missed Abby. He paced through the house restlessly, wondering what was happening to him. He'd come out here to recuperate but he was more tense than ever before and it was all because of the young woman who shared the house with him.

He hadn't seen her in days and when he'd asked Rosie, had been informed that she went out in search of work so she could earn some money. It was hard to imagine Abigail being anyone's servant and his heart was filled with so much compassion for her. This woman had been through a lot and she was trying to pick up the pieces of her life. But for how long would she work as a servant? This wasn't her lot and he longed to find her and tell her that with her education she could be a governess.

One evening as he was strolling through the garden, he heard the sound of someone weeping. He frowned when he recognized it to be Abby. The sound was coming from a part of the garden that was poorly lit by an old lantern.

"Lady Abigail, what's wrong? Has someone offended you?"

"Don't call me that," she cried out bitterly and he saw in the dim light that her face was smudged with soot. "Don't ever call me lady again."

"My lady, setbacks can never change who you are," he sat down on the slab beside her. "I'm sorry that you're so sad."

"I deserve this," Abby wiped her tears but more took their place. "This is my punishment for how I was before." David wanted to protest that it wasn't so but wisely held his peace. "All though, I lived a privileged life, never caring how other people lived and what pain they were going through. I took servants in my father's household for granted and never once treated them like human

beings.” She put her face in her hands and wept. David let her cry so she could relieve the pain in her heart. She raised her face, even though it was getting dark and he couldn’t see her very well. “Until the day that my father died and I lost everything, I didn’t bother learning any of the servants’ names and never allowed them to look at me in the face.”

David didn’t know what to say. His own sister-in-law behaved in exactly the same way as Abby was describing. Servants were treated as part of the furniture and fixtures, never being acknowledged at all. It was a wakeup call for even him, and he wished he had paid more attention to the men and women who had served his family for years.

“Now that I’m a maid, I know how it feels. No one cares whether I live or die, no one cares when the fire burns me or I’m scalded by hot liquids in the kitchen,” she shook her head. “My knees have hardened, my hands have blisters and my knuckles are raw from all the scrubbing and cleaning of pots and pans. Yet no one even cares.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. This is my penance. Now I understand why my mother used to tell me never to trust in riches and wealth. These things aren’t permanent and people’s stations in life change. Take the Armstrong family who I’m working for as an example. They’re new money simply because Mr. Armstrong happened to be in the right place at the right time. He went to India as a soldier of the East India Company to guard the British interests abroad. One evening as he and one of his senior officers were strolling in the garden, they came across a cobra,” she shuddered. “What struck them about this particular serpent was that it seemed to be lying on glowing stones. They wanted to kill it but one of the Indian servants told them it was a god of some sort, and promised to show them more glowing stones if only they would spare the life of the serpent.”

David’s interest was piqued. “Did he?”

“Yes. The man led them to a sort of cave where they had to jump over a few serpents before they reached the rubies. The two men had found one of the richest deposits of rubies in Madikeri, in south

western India. Of course the company took most of the rubies but allowed the two gentlemen to keep some.”

“You’ve learnt a lot in the short time you’ve been in the household.”

That garnered a smile from Abby. “Mama used to say servants have ears but we never thought it was true. Even though we’re treated like wallpaper, there’s so much one can learn by listening in on the masters’ conversation.”

David reached out a hand in the dark and touched Abby’s arm. “You impress me greatly, my lady.”

“Why?”

“Apart from the earlier outburst, you seem to have taken a bad situation and turned it into an educational one. Go on with the story of the Armstrongs.”

“Well, Mr. Armstrong decided that being a soldier wasn’t enough so he found a way of investing in exporting silks, spices and indigo dye to England and other parts of Europe. Now the man, once a mere foot soldier is wealthy beyond words and looking for a title to purchase.”

What pleased David was that Abby’s voice was devoid of envy. She was merely telling a story about the family she worked for and he realized that she was really a changed woman.

“Life is very strange,” he said at last. “I’ve seen combat while in France fighting Napoleon and something small can change a person’s whole life,” he absentmindedly rubbed his injured leg. “I woke up one morning, full of health and by evening, I had nearly lost my life.”

“Never will I ever take people for granted again,” the sadness was back in her voice and David wanted to reach out and hold her. “Look at me now,” she sniffed. “I had over ten offers of marriage and scoffed at the men who presented themselves, thinking my life was better than theirs and that I deserved better.” She gave a small sob. “Now look at me, no man will ever want me because I’m nothing more than a common scullery maid.”

“Abigail, please don’t degrade yourself so.”

"It's the truth and much as it hurts, I deserve it all."

"It's not true."

"What do you mean? Are you blind?"

"I meant it's not true that no man will want you," he paused to let his words sink in.

"Oh!"

"Yes, Abby," he finally took her hands in the dark. "I've been in love with you since we met but you're a lady, the daughter of a baron" she snorted softly but he ignored the sound. "You're royalty and though you may be down for now, some day you will rise again. You're determined and that makes me humble." He sighed. "I came to Dorchester to hide from the world after my injuries and also to plan my next course of action. There I was, feeling sorry for myself and yet it was always obvious from the beginning that I would never amount to much. Being a second son isn't really a blessing, and if my father hadn't bought me a commission in the army, only God knows where I would be right now."

"Your speech and manner speaks of nobility too."

"Well, you might as well know it now. My father was the Duke of Somerset and my brother Edward is now the duke. But I can't be at home because I'm only a second son."

"England is a beautiful country but some of the laws need to be changed."

"Not in a hundred years," he smiled at the indignation in her voice. "Still, we're better than so many around the world."

"You could be right."

"You're making me lose track of what I was trying to tell you, my lady."

Abby giggled softly and the sound warmed David's heart. "You're one of the most beautiful women England has ever produced and believe me, in just a few months' time you will have sorted your life out. The scandal will be over and people will be more receptive towards you. I wouldn't be surprised if the Regent Prince sends for

you in order to make a good match for you. Our Regent is a man with a good eye, and he knows value when he sees it. It's just a matter of time."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I want you to know that I love you, but I have nothing. My commission in the army is over due to my injury, I have nothing to my name and right now, here I am seeking refuge in the home of a dear friend. All I have is a small army pension which isn't enough to take care of my own needs. What's more, I'm lame and broke and with no prospects for the future. In times past, I would be burnt at the stake for even daring to speak with such a noble woman as yourself."

She giggled again.

"I hope I haven't offended you, my lady."

"You haven't," Abby wanted to jump up and dance. This was a handsome man who had just declared that he loved her. He had nothing but she knew that for the first time in her life, she was in love.

"What are you saying, my lady?"

"You really are blind," she smiled. "I've been avoiding you because I know you think I'm just a flighty woman who caused a lot of problems for your friend."

"At first that's what I thought, but now that I've seen you working so hard these past few weeks, I believe you're a true noble woman not just by birth, but at heart too."

"You say such nice things."

"But true, nevertheless. Do I stand a chance with you, my fair lady?"

"Yes," she whispered and David gave a shout of joy.

Simple Things In Life

Abby smiled when she looked at the small bouquet of wild pansies that Rosie had picked for her just that morning. This was a far cry from her previous wedding arrangements but she was so happy that she didn't care that she was getting married in Rosie's old wedding gown that had been adjusted by the two of them so it would fit her slender frame.

Their witnesses were the middle aged couple who beamed with pleasure at having such an honour bestowed upon them.

"Mark my words, my dear husband. These two are fine nobles even though they don't look like it," Rosie had remarked to Paul just that morning. "One day, it will be said that you and I stood up for two nobles, common folk like us."

"You're a very romantic woman and I love you for that," Paul kissed his wife's cheek. "But face reality, what nobility lives like two paupers? They scrounge for whatever little they can get."

"It was before your time and mine, but I heard David telling Abby that he used to come here to visit the master when they were younger. I seem to remember something about an engagement between Miss Abby and our master but I could be wrong," she shrugged. "My memory fails me but there's something about these two that tells me they're no ordinary folk like you and me. Mark my words."

Even as the local vicar was conducting their simple but deeply moving wedding ceremony, Abby and David only had eyes for each other. Reverend Peter Smith was happy to perform the wedding of two people who were clearly so much in love. This love, he thought, was bound to last forever. He'd wed many couples in the past and many of them weren't even in love. Some didn't even like each other. All they did was have lavish ceremonies filled with pomp and glory all to prove their worth in money. A few months

and sometimes even weeks later, he would receive news of course in the form of rumours, that the couple were now living in sin with other people.

But not these two. They were as poor as could be for they could barely afford the certificate of marriage that he was to give them, and yet the love they felt for each other could be felt within the walls of the small church. If only more couples waited to fall in love, the real and pure kind, not merely lust or for other selfish reasons, then marriages would be heaven on earth as the good Lord intended from the beginning.

"I wish I could have provided a carriage to take you home, my love," David's eyes were filled with regret when they stepped out of the church. The elderly couple had already left for home because Rosie had promised to make them a wedding lunch.

"My darling," Abby turned to him and touched his cheek gently. "We have each other and that's all that matters. This is our day and what's important is the love we share."

"You're such a beautiful woman both inside and outside, and I know that you will bring me a lot of goodness." He took her hand. "I don't want you to go and work for those people. We'll make do with what we have until something better comes up."

"Thank you for saying that for I really had no heart to return. Mr. Armstrong is a very peculiar fellow and makes me very uncomfortable."

They held hands and walked home slowly, just enjoying each other's company and their love. Abby thought about the past and how different things were right now. She would never in a million years have imagined herself walking on foot and holding hands with the man who had just become her husband. The ring David had given her was one he had bought at the village square just the previous day. It was cheap and as she looked at it, laughing softly.

"What's making my beautiful bride so happy?"

"I was just thinking of how the Lord can change a person. It seems as if I'm in a dream right now. Never would I have imagined myself enjoying the simple things of life like fresh air, wild flowers and this

ring. It just feels so right, somehow.”

“You deserve more and better and when our lot changes, I will give you everything your heart desires.”

Abby smiled, quite contented with her life at that moment. “All that matters is being with you for the rest of my life and knowing that you love me.”

“There’s no doubt about that,” he stopped when they got to the gate. “That’s strange, were we expecting any guests?”

“That’s Lord and Lady Campbell’s carriage. I remember it because it nearly ran me over some weeks ago.”

David didn’t know how his friend would react when he found out that he had married Abby. “I hope there isn’t any trouble.”

“Why?”

“You and I being married is rather odd.”

“Well, the deed’s done and so let’s just find out what happens next.”

The duke and duchess were genuinely happy to see the two. “I know Rosie stole your moment but that woman can never keep a secret,” Errol smiled at his two friends. “We hear congratulations are in order.”

“Yes, your grace,” David bowed as Abby curtsied.

“Please remember that we’re peers,” Errol said, shaking David’s hand and kissing Abby’s cheek. Lilly hugged both of them. “My duchess and I are so happy for the two of you. It’s about time you had some goodness in your lives for a change.”

“You’re welcome to share our simple wedding lunch,” Abby said shyly. She couldn’t believe that just a few months ago she was engaged to Errol and broke it off because she was really jealous of his little innocent nephews. She felt a twinge or remorse and it must have shown on her face, for Lilly pulled her aside.

“Shall we go to the kitchen for a word,” the latter said.

“Yes, my lady.”

“Abby, you’re my peer so please no titles. How have you been?”

“Really happy,” she said simply and Lilly nodded.

“You look so happy and contented. Errol tells me David is a good man and he’ll take very good care of you.”

“So you knew he was staying here?”

“No, we just found out when we arrived. It was Rosie who told us that the two of you arrived on the same day. As we waited for you to return from church, Errol told me about David and how they spent most of their school holidays together. David has always been a loner, being the second son with no prospects. His happiest days were those spent here in Dorchester, no wonder that he returned here when he needed somewhere to go.”

“He doesn’t talk much about his family.”

“I know only a little of what Errol told me.” They entered the kitchen. “We have some news for you, but I’ll let the duke convey it.”

“Didn’t you come with the boys?”

“The journey is cumbersome and they had slight colds. In any case, we’re going back right away so it would have been a waste of time to bring them. Those two are just too boisterous.”

Abby felt something like envy when she heard the pride in Lilly’s voice, but quickly quashed it. But for her selfishness, she might have been the boys’ mother.

“Do you regret not marrying Errol?” Lilly asked in a quiet voice.

Abby tilted her head to one side and then shook it slowly. “A few weeks ago, I might have said yes. But now I see that all things were working for my good. With Errol, it would have been a marriage of convenience only. He needed my dowry and I needed a handsome man to show off to the world,” she laughed in self-derision. “But now, I know that I married David because I love him and he loves me too. We both have nothing but we’re so happy together. I know that somehow, things will work out for us.”

To her surprise, Lilly reached out and hugged her. “All will be well,

you'll see."

And Errol repeated the same words to them as they finished their simple meal of freshly baked bread, smoked ham and warm milk. Rosie had baked a fruit cake to commemorate the wedding and though simple, it was one of the most wholesome meals Abby had ever eaten.

"After you left, Abby, I got in touch with a friend of mine who is a Bow Street Runner. He did some investigations and I'm pleased to let you know that the Frenchman who conned you was arrested in Paris. Apparently, he tried to do the same thing to another woman but she was smarter and her brothers were alert. The French law enforcers are working with their British counterparts to try and salvage anything for you and others who lost their wealth and precious items to that man."

Abby's face was red with embarrassment and David reached out a hand and touched her arm. "It's all well, my love," he said softly and she nodded slightly.

"The British Foreign office has taken the matter up and immediately when anything comes up, I will let you know."

"Thank you so much," Abby said. "You really didn't have to and I have learnt to live without what I lost."

"Still, there's hope that things will turn out better for you."

"We just have one request," David didn't want his beloved to continue feeling slighted.

"Go ahead," Errol urged.

"We need your permission to continue living here for a short while as we think of what to do next. I've been thinking about applying to the Foreign office so I can be posted in the colonies and Abby is fine with the idea."

"Take all the time you need because we won't be using the manor for a while. We're in the process of carrying out some renovations but we're not in a hurry. Lord and Lady Worthington left the town house for their sons and we're also renovating their country home in Exeter, the one that got burnt. The boys will need their homes

when they grow up, so once we're done with those, we can then concentrate on our own."

"We're most grateful to you, my lord and lady."

Restoration

Abby woke up early the next morning but found that her husband wasn't in the bedroom with her. Thinking that he had perhaps returned to the one he'd been using, she started getting out of bed to go in search of him when the door opened.

"What are you doing out of bed this early?" David exclaimed, hurrying to the bed. "I just went to check on Rosie who had promised to bring us some milk."

"When I didn't find you, I thought you'd gone back to your old room."

"Why would I do that?" He chuckled when her face turned red. "In any case, we had an early morning visitor and I really don't know what to make of it all."

"I didn't hear anyone coming in."

"That's because you were sound asleep when I left the room. But in short, the messenger or should I say messengers are from Somerset, my county seat."

"Is everything alright?"

David shook his head and then she saw the sadness in his eyes. "My brother, the duke is dead."

"I'm so sorry, my darling," she took his hand. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

"My brother and I weren't as close as we should have been and it breaks my heart that he died all alone, sad and full of despair."

Abby frowned slightly. "Didn't you tell me he was married?"

"He was," David shook his head. "It was my sister-in-law who caused his sudden collapse and subsequent death."

"I don't understand."

"From what my men tell me, Camille loved to throw parties and spend lavishly. Mercifully, my father had tied up his wealth so she couldn't access it all at one time, else we would be talking about a different matter altogether. What happened is that apparently one of the men who frequented the estate was her lover. A few days ago, Camille took a good amount of my brother's money and ran away with her lover. The last they were heard of, they were headed to Europe. Edward loved Camille so much, and I guess the shock caused him to have a seizure and by the time the doctor was called, he was already dead."

"Oh dear," Abby couldn't imagine the shock the man must have received. "Did she make away with all his wealth?"

"No. As I said, my father had tied up all his assets in such a way that Edward was to continue receiving an allowance until he turned thirty, then he would become responsible for the whole estate. I believe our father thought that by that time they would have children and be more accountable. My poor brother was only twenty seven."

"It's really sad."

"Now I have to return to Somerset and take the title since I'm next in line." David looked at Abby and she saw the uncertainty in his eyes. "I don't know if I have it in me to be a duke."

"You're strong, brave and care about people. Those are qualities that are important, and besides, I think an estate such as yours has a good manager who will guide you."

"My wise bride," he kissed her forehead. "You were destined to be a duchess."

"I didn't marry you for your title."

"No you didn't, for you married me when I had nothing. Yet now we are going to take up our rightful position. Didn't I tell you that things will one day change for you?"

"Indeed you did."

* * *

For many years thereafter, everyone said Somerset had never had such a lovely and wonderful duchess who genuinely cared about her subjects. Many didn't know the full story of Lady Abigail Wentworth's previous life and those who did really didn't care.

The duke and duchess were one of the happiest and loving couples that the county had seen and their estate flourished as did their people.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading, *Taming the Lady*. We hope you really enjoyed the story. If so, leaving a review is a great way to let others know (reviews are such a great encouragement to our authors also!). Leave a Review Now!

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Your Friends at PureRead

* * *

To Delight a Duke

Discontented Lady

Poverty hurt and Antoinette Martineau often said if it had a face and a body, she would have done all she could to challenge it to a duel and come out the better of the two. From when she was a child, she hadn't understood why people treated her and her mother with scorn and disdain.

It was only when she turned eighteen that the truth finally emerged. She didn't belong in Charente, Normandy and neither did her mother. She was the daughter of a man who was so despised by his own family that even saying his name was taboo.

Emile Martineau was a smooth talker who had squandered all his family's wealth including selling off most of the land, leaving them nearly destitute. When he ran away to make his fortune in Paris, the whole village was pleased to see him go. But a few months later, Emile had returned with an English girl, Hilda Cummings. She was pregnant at the time and immediately after Antoinette was born, her father disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again.

Her mother had confessed on her death bed three years ago that even though her life had been hard, she was glad to have kept the child. "You're the only good thing that came out of my union with that man," Hilda had said tearfully, her voice filled with regret. "I had a good job as a lady's maid and the woman I worked for really trusted me, but I broke her heart and betrayed her."

"How Mama?"

"Emile seduced me and convinced me to take my lady's jewelry and money and we eloped. He deceived me that he was a titled nobleman, a count, which is equivalent to an earl in England. I was young and foolish and succumbed to his seduction. When we got here, my eyes were finally opened but it was too late. He had squandered all the money I had stolen and besides that, I was with child. His family never accepted me for they believed I was one of

the women on whom Emile squandered his family's wealth."

"But why did you stay, Mama?"

"Where else was I to go?"

"Back to England."

"I would have been arrested and then also, the shame I had brought upon my family wouldn't allow me to return. I made my bed and have spent the past eighteen years lying on it. I just don't want you to continue suffering when I'm gone."

"Mama, you can't leave me alone."

"My dear child," Hilda gently stroked her daughter's hair. "I've been ailing for a while but didn't want you to know. You were still very young and I prayed that I would be allowed to see you grow into a young woman before I was taken away. God has been gracious and I can't ask for any more. Please promise me that you will go back to England and find my people. Tell them that I died repenting of my sins and waywardness."

Her mother had died a few days later and it took Antoine three years to come to terms with her death. Thankfully, her mother had taught her English and she spoke it fluently, which made it easy for her to find work as a tutor. She actually took over her mother's old post and for three years she'd been able to earn a decent living. But things were quickly getting out of hand because the young boys she'd previously tutored were now grown up and began making lewd suggestions to her.

Perhaps it was time to go back to England and find her mother's family. She wasn't sure what the reception would be like but she would at least try. Speaking English gave her an advantage for she would find work as a French tutor. She spoke both languages fluently and it would also be a chance for her to make a better life for herself.

As she was preparing for her journey to England, she received a message from Paris that her father was dead. This came in the form of an old trunk that was delivered to his family home but the messenger was turned away and redirected to the dilapidated house she'd lived in with her mother and a few other boarders who mostly

minded their own business. The presence of the three or so elderly people gave her a sense of security.

The only thing the messenger could tell her was that her father had died while in prison and she didn't know whether to mourn or feel relieved. For so long, she'd feared that her father would return and she would have to face him. She felt nothing but hatred for the man who had deceived her poor mother, brought her to Normandy, a long way from home and abandoned her to her own fate.

"Relief at least," she murmured as she opened the trunk and wriggled her nose at the musty smell coming from within. It was obvious that anything of importance had been looted and it was a wonder that the trunk had even found its way back to Emile Martineau's home county. Someone must have had at least some respect for him. At first all Antoine could see were old clothes and papers that looked useless. She wanted to burn them but decided to hold on to them for a day or two as she decided what to do with the trunk and its contents. It was a reminder of the father she'd never seen but whose memory left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Her mother's tale of woe had made her wary of men and any kind of entanglement with them thus she didn't realize that her disinterest added to her allure. Men were interested in her but she didn't give them a chance to get close.

"Never give in to the wiles of the French," her mother would tell her time and time again. "They will only use you and then abandon you when you're in trouble."

There were of course, a few good men but Antoine didn't think her mother would have approved, for Hilda had come to despise everything French. Even though she was half French, Antoine always felt that she was more English because she'd taken her mother's fair complexion, blond hair and blue eyes. She'd seen how badly her mother had been treated by her father's people and didn't think she ever wanted to go through that in her life. Once was enough, thank you!

Lord Richard Foxworth, the Duke of Hampshire was in a foul mood and his servants knew to keep their distance. It wasn't often that Richard lost his temper but when he did, it was often accompanied by a few broken items in the house. The only person who had the ability to calm him down when he was in one of his rare rages, was the Dowager Duchess, Lady Amelia his mother. But she was visiting friends in the countryside when the solicitor brought him the news that had him in a rage.

"That French man," he hissed through his teeth, wishing he could find the culprit who had put his whole estate in jeopardy. Not only had Emile Martineau caused his beloved aunt's death, for Richard blamed the man solely, but he had also made off with the family's precious items. The most important of all was the signet ring which if it fell in the wrong hands, could cause him to lose everything.

His mother and Aunt Edith had never gotten along and when the latter fell into the clutches of the unscrupulous French man, the former had felt quite justified. "I always said your father's sister was a scatterbrain but you thought I was being unkind to her," Lady Amelia didn't gloat, but there was satisfaction in her voice. "Which person in their senses takes the family jewelery and hands it over to a total stranger? What your grandmother didn't give me went to your aunt. In her foolishness she just handed everything over to the man on a silver platter. " She turned angry eyes towards her sister-in-law. "Are you sure you didn't give your lover the house too?"

"Ma, you know that Aunt Edith was in love with that fellow," Richard defended his aunt strongly. "I don't think there's anything to worry about. We can always replace the jewels if we want, but they belonged to Aunt Edith."

"She's here, let her speak for herself and tell us how we're going to solve this issue," Lady Amelia had goaded her sister-in-law. "Is there anything else we should know about?" But Edith was too distraught to even say a word. She pinned away until one morning they found her dead in her bed. At first everyone thought she had taken some poison but the coroner ruled that out.

"This poor woman died of a broken heart," he pronounced and Lady Amelia had scoffed.

“There’s no such thing as dying from a broken heart,” she insisted. “Edith was just a weak person who rather than face what she’d done, chose the easy way out. That Frenchman must be pursued so he can pay for his crimes.”

“Ma, please don’t say that,” Richard had begged. “The man is long gone and where would we even begin?”

“You better be sure that we didn’t lose much more of value than Edith’s jewellery. Somehow I never trusted your aunt so make sure you found out everything she may have given that wicked man.”

Richard had strongly rebuked his mother for her insensitivity and Lady Amelia had thereafter kept her thoughts to herself. But now almost a year later, Richard wished he had pursued the lost items like his mother had insisted. At the time he’d felt sorry for his aunt and didn’t want her to feel any worse. Now, he had just found out that the family signet ring was missing. How hadn’t he notice that before, he wondered. Had he been too sympathetic and blinded by the love he had for his paternal aunt that he’d subconsciously overlooked many things?

He might have carried on in his ignorance if the family solicitor hadn’t come and alerted him to the fact that something was wrong.

“Mr. Maynard, I’m telling you that I had no idea that the signet ring was missing,” he looked at the man who sat across from him. “You know that for this past year, I left all business decisions for you to handle so there was no time I used that ring to seal any documents.”

Lawrence Maynard had served Richard’s father, who’d been a very shrewd and meticulous man, unlike the son who seemed to have his head in the clouds. But he wisely kept his thoughts to himself for fear of receiving a tongue lashing. Still, he wished Lady Amelia was present for then he would have had the courage to speak his mind freely. The dowager loved her son but not to the extent that she overlooked his faults.

“I’m afraid the family seal has been used for some questionable transactions and vast withdrawals were made from your family trust.”

“What?” Richard sat upright, hitting the surface of the desk with his open hand. “How did that happen?”

“Mercifully, your father had given instructions that when the sums reached a certain limit, your mother was to be consulted in the event that he wasn’t around. We only noticed the anomalies when the bank contacted us for instructions to transfer a large sum of money to a French bank.”

“I don’t believe that for a full year we’ve been losing money and you knew nothing of it,” Richard glared at his solicitor but Lawrence was undaunted. He knew the young man was only trying to cover up his own inadequacies, but still wished the duchess had been around. She would have put the young man in his place.

“Your grace, it’s a good thing we noticed this but you have to move fast and find that signet ring before the culprit sells the house from under your feet.”

Richard waited until Lawrence had left before he gave full vent to his anger. One of his mother’s precious vases was the victim and he rang the bell impatiently. A young lad came trembling into the study.

“See to that mess,” he told him, before picking up his cane and striding out of the study.

“Yes, your grace.”

Shocking Discovery

"May 20th 18..

The foolish woman thinks I'll marry her. These English women are simpletons and it would be something akin to a curse for me to marry another of them. Good thing I married the other one so I have an excuse not to fall into that trap again.

Lady Eugenia Craydon is my latest conquest. She believes that if she leaves her husband, I will be forced to marry her. Poor foolish and delusional broad. All I needed were the jewels that she wears so proudly. And now that I have them in my possession, I can control her as I wish.

This is such an easy game that it grows boring. Can't I find a worthy opponent to deal with?"

Antoine felt revulsion growing within her as she read her father's journal. There were entries dating back years as she read about how he'd seduced young unmarried ladies and even married ones, just to get their money and other precious items. It was humiliating to think that she was born of such a one as this. He was callous and didn't seem in the least bit ashamed of what he'd done.

The two most recent entries, were nearly six months ago and she knew it had all stopped when her father was arrested and put in prison. A befitting place for him, no doubt since he had committed a lot of evils against unsuspecting women.

"July 13th 18

Lady Edith Foxworth, a spinster who imagines that she and I can become man and wife. What a farce!! The woman is an old maid and seducing her had its benefits. Gullible and desperate she was like a ripe apple just waiting to fall into my hands.

Do I feel guilty at all? No. These women deserve everything that is coming to them because of their weaknesses. I need the money, they

need the attention. It's a fair trade and I shouldn't be judged for my actions."

Antoine turned another page.

"November 20th, 18

Perhaps this little miss came closest to trapping me into marriage. It was a narrow escape, and I had to flee England for she pasted my photos all over the papers to show proof of that stupid engagement. Took me by surprise, that one. Little Lady Abigail Wentworth. This one was a most worthy opponent for she never gave in. I feel something akin to respect for her, no wonder she nearly had me trapped. Still, I came out the victor when I walked away with everything she and her arrogant father own.

I am the master and everyone should acknowledge that."

Her father was a narcissist who loved himself and felt like he was entitled to gaining from others in whatever way he wished. He'd turned respectable women into tools of his mockery and spite and the fact that he showed no remorse whatsoever, shocked her beyond anything. How could a human being be so vile and wicked, she wondered.

She couldn't imagine that she was his offspring and regretted she had insisted on keeping the family name. Her mother had wanted her to use her maiden name but she'd resisted, taking pride in being half French and half English. Now she was sorry for everyone knew her as Antoine Martineau, the daughter of a scoundrel.

Thankfully, the family name was fairly common in South France and she could lay claim to being a descendant of another clan. But deep within her, she would always know that she was the daughter of a man who had used, misused and abused women in the worst way possible, then betrayed them.

There were a few last pages and she forced herself to read them.

"No one will ever find out where I keep my trophies. It's very regrettable that circumstances and need forced me to sell a few of those precious pieces in order to survive and maintain my lifestyle. But who will ever know that my wealth lies buried in the vault that I prepared for my inevitable demise? I will be buried with everything I have acquired, for I

shall most certainly need my wealth in the afterlife. The Lady of The Torch bears my great secret, and no other.

How like a prince I shall lie, on a bed of the most precious jewels and gems. A befitting send off for a worthy noble such as myself."

Antoine shook her head in wonder. Her father had been completely demented and if what she suspected was true, a real mad man. All she had to do was find the vault that he had purchased and prepared, no doubt by using the money from the precious items he'd stolen and sold.

Just who was the Lady of the Torch, Antoine wondered. Was this her father's mistress in Paris, perhaps the only woman he'd ever loved? She tried to put the journal away but found herself returning to it and the more she read, the more she discovered her father's secret. When she'd first read it, she wondered what the small numbers at the bottom of each page were, then she began to suspect that they were the sum of items that he'd taken from each woman.

That meant that her father had a great stash somewhere, no doubt being guarded for him by the Lady of the Torch. Would this lady, whoever she was, be willing to hand over the stolen items so she could return them to their rightful owners?

That was going to be her mission from now on. To find and restore whatever her father had taken away by devious means. Poor women, she thought. What a fiend her father had been but she would blot out the blight against her lineage by restoring and making restitution wherever possible.

* * *

It took Antoine nearly five days before she discovered that the Lady of the Torch was an old chapel which hadn't been used since the French Revolution. It was still under the Catholic Church but a bigger and more modern chapel had been built a few metres away from it.

She found out quite by accident as she was waiting for a carriage to

take her to yet another part of Paris. She'd sold everything of value to make this journey and hoped her money wouldn't run out before she set things right back in England. Her father's journal had specified five names whose jewels he had acquired. The rest, he'd said were cheap trinkets that had funded his lifestyle. The more precious ones were his trophies.

As she was waiting for the carriage, she overheard an elderly woman mentioning the Lady of the Torch and she subtly drew near, only to discover that the woman wanted to visit her husband's grave at that location. Excited because her quest was nearly over, Antoine had purchased a ticket to the place and alighted after the old lady and her companion.

There was a gardener who tended the few graves but she could also see elaborate tombs and vaults.

"Excuse me, sir," she approached him and he raised himself up. He looked like he'd lived forever, because his hair was very white against his grizzled skin. "I'm looking for my family's vault, reserved by my father."

"The name please."

"Emile Martineau," she said and held her breath.

"Fine young man," the gardener said. "He was here a few months ago to bury his young son. Very sad and moving ceremony and I could see how sad he felt."

"Yes, we lost my brother," Antoine put a handkerchief to her eyes, praying that the man wouldn't ask for details. "I'd like to visit the vault please."

"This way," the man was tall and walked with a stoop. Antoine's heart was pounding loudly and she feared that the man might hear. "Each family has their own key, did you bring one?"

"Yes, sir." And Antoine was grateful for getting her father's useless trunk back and for whoever had packed it hurriedly. They hadn't bothered to read the journal or they would have found the single key at the bottom of the trunk and been here on this quest.

"Good. Take your time for I like to say death is peaceful." The man

frowned. "I haven't seen your father in a while. Is he alright?"

"He traveled to Charente, our family home."

"I see." He took her to the back of the small chapel which though very old, had been well maintained. He opened a side door which led into an empty room. It housed a number of vaults. "Many people don't like being here all alone and ask me to sit with them. Will you be afraid?"

"The dead can do no harm to us, it's the living that we should fear most," Antoine quoted her mother. "I've just come to pay my respects to my brother and then I will be leaving again."

"Take all the time you need for he's going nowhere. If the casket is too heavy to open, I can help you. It's the third from the other end."

"Should I need your help, I will come and find you," she promised.

Antoine waited until the man had left before taking a deep breath and walking towards the vault he had indicated. It bore her family name and she put the key in and turned. There was a single well polished white casket which she knew contained no body and she furtively raised it. She nearly dropped the lid when she saw the collection of jewelery. They sparked as if to mock her and she lowered the lid once again, wondering how she was going to carry it all out without being spotted or raising anyone's suspicion. It wasn't much but she was sure they were heavy and all she had was a canvas bag.

She opened the casket once again and stuffed as much as she could into the bag she had, glad to note that she had taken nearly half. But the bag was heavy and she was going to have to find a way of walking without trouble. An idea suddenly came to her and she spread the jewelery and then tied the bag around her middle, glad that she'd worn a large cloak. If anyone cared to observe her closely, they would think she was with child and she prayed no one would draw closer.

It took her two days to empty the vault and when she was in her small boarding room which she'd taken in mid town Paris, she looked at the items and prayed that God would protect her. "I'm returning them to the owners so please don't allow me to fall into

the wrong hands,” she pleaded. “I’m only doing what my father should have done, had he come to his senses. The owners of these items need them, please help me across the channel and into England without being discovered.”

She remembered what her mother had told her one time. *“From time immemorial, women have learnt how to hide things on their selves. For example, during times of war, many ladies sewed their jewels into the seams of their dresses and passed through perilous places undetected. That was how I managed to get my lady’s jewelery out of the house without anyone being the wiser.”*

For the next two days, Antoine was kept busy sewing different items of jewelery into her garments, careful to place them in such a way so no one would be suspicious. It was as she was putting the last pieces in that she came across the ring and stared at it in horror. It was a family signet ring, no doubt belonging to an important family. Of all the items, she deduced that this was the most precious and felt the urgency of restoring it back to the rightful owners.

Her mother had served a noble woman and once told her that the family signet ring was valued above all their other jewels for it was a representation of the family. *“When a family needed to prove and authenticate any documents, they would seal them with the ring. Lost jewels and clothes can easily be replaced, but not a ring. It is a very special heirloom and guarded with a lot of care.”*

Yet she held one in her hand and she strained to see the inscription on the inside of the back. Without a magnifying glass, she could only make out the name Fox but was sure that once she got to England, someone would recognize the seal and lead her to the owner.

Catch The Thief

“You say your aunt lost the family signet ring?”

“Yes, Ma,” Richard was sweating even though he tried not to show it. His mother was being too calm and he knew that always happened before she reacted. “It was one of the items that Aunt Edith gave that Frenchman.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” Lady Amelia peered at her son through narrowed blue eyes, like his own. “What are you hiding from me?”

“Ma, I’m really sorry that I should have been more observant but wasn’t.” He took a deep breath. Might as well get it all out and face the consequences. “Mr. Maynard informed me that someone used it to withdraw large sums of money from the family trust. It was only spotted when the person tried to transfer a huge sum to a bank in Paris.”

“That wicked Frenchman, no doubt.”

“I think so. But after my investigations, I was informed that he died in prison about six months ago and this request for transfer was made a few days ago. Someone else, maybe an accomplice must have tried to get the money.”

“Or else, he’d made a payment or IOU to someone who decided to cash it in after his death.”

Richard was surprised at his mother’s astuteness and it showed on his face. Amelia chuckled. “You’re just like your father, thinking women are only good for bearing children and doing house chores. My father wasn’t a nobleman or gentry but he taught me a lot about business dealings. Do we know how much we’ve lost?”

“Mr. Maynard says it’s quite a substantial amount and advised that I do all I can to find that ring before it is used to sell our house and

other properties.”

“This is big trouble,” Amelia couldn’t believe how foolish her sister-in-law had been. “That ring can cause us to lose everything. A person only has to produce a deed of sale with that seal to prove that they own the properties we have. Why did you trust your aunt with such a precious item?”

“Ma, I never thought she would actually take the ring. Her jewelry was hers to dispose of in any way, but she should never have touched the ring.”

“Well, perhaps she felt that she was more of a Foxworth than you and I.”

“Let’s not speak ill of the dead, Ma. The deed is done and now our priority is to find that ring and bring it back before we have more trouble.”

“Very true! Blaming a person who isn’t here is a waste of time. Do you have any idea who that Frenchman’s accomplice could be?”

“In many cases it’s usually a woman.”

“You’re being prejudiced.”

“No Ma, just think. A scoundrel like Martineau could never trust another man. He most probably used another unsuspecting woman to carry out some of his crooked dealings.”

Amelia nodded slowly. “You do have a point, but until we know the circles he moved in, we have no idea who this woman can be. She could be old, maybe his mother or young, a lover or mistress. The list is endless and I fear that by the time we catch up with the person, we’ll have lost a lot.”

“Please pray,” Richard said in a soft, hoarse voice. He felt that he’d failed his mother and he couldn’t imagine what would happen should they lose everything. Just a few months ago, head read about how the Lady Abigail Wentworth had trusted the same Frenchman and her family ended up losing everything. No one knew where the young lady was now and some suspected that she had committed suicide to escape the shame of that happening. In his case, his aunt had put his family in deep trouble and she wasn’t

here to see what happened. For a moment he felt angry at her but then compassion took over. How she must have suffered in her final days, knowing the grave mistake that she'd made.

"What are you thinking now?"

"About Aunt Edith."

Amelia scoffed. "Not that woman again!"

"Ma, I know you and my aunt never saw eye to eye, but please apply some compassion to your heart. Can you imagine how much suffering and torment she went through before her death? It's true she died of a broken heart knowing that she'd betrayed the family in the worst way possible. The torment and guilt must have ripped through her heart."

"Enough," Amelia held up a hand, feeling shaken. She'd never thought about her sister-in-law's state of mind in the days leading to her death. "Do all you can to find that ring, Richard. Your whole life and the future of this family depend on it."

"I'll do it, Ma."

* * *

Everything went well for Antoine, but only until she set foot in England. No one had questioned or bothered her on the coach between Paris and Calais and then on the ferry to Dover. In order to safeguard the ring she'd found, she wore it on her finger just in case her valise was stolen. Her priority was to get the ring back to the owners and she guarded it fiercely.

But the keen eyes of a customs officer spotted it and he pulled her over. "What's that you got over there?"

"Just my clothes," her heart was pounding.

"I mean on your finger."

"It's a family ring."

"Your family?"

“No sir. I’m returning it to the owners.”

“Here, let me see it,” he held out a hand and looked so fierce that Antoine had no choice than to pull it off her thumb because it was too big for her fingers. She handed it over to him and he observed it for a while then looked at her with piercing eyes. “Where did you find this ring?”

“Someone in Paris had it so I’m returning it to the family it belongs to.”

“Young lady, I’m afraid you’ll have to wait in holding for a while.”

“Why? What have I done?”

“This ring belongs to the Duke of Hampshire’s family and it’s been missing for a year. That you have it in your possession makes you a suspect and they have to clear you before I can allow you out of here.”

“Dear Lord,” Antoine murmured under her breath. The man hadn’t even glanced at her valise, what if he demanded that she open it and then he searched her clothes? But he didn’t, being only interested in the ring, he put her in a small room. She had no idea how long she’d been locked up before two men who identified themselves as Bow Street Runners came and whisked her away.

Like the first customs officer, they had no interest in her valise but in the ring. “Young lady, you realize that you’re in a lot of trouble, don’t you?”

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” she argued. “The ring was given to me by someone to deliver to the family to whom it belongs.”

“And pray, what might this person’s name be?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, for then we’ll know whether you’re guilty or not.”

“Emile Martineau,” she said at last and the men stared at her as if she’d just announced that she wanted to go and see the Regent. “He was my father.”

“What’s your name?”

“Antoinette Martineau,” she said simply, knowing that she was putting herself into more trouble by associating with the man who was obviously well known by the two men.

“The duke himself will have to come and release you, for you need to explain how you got his family ring in the first place.”

* * *

Richard was taking lunch with his mother when he received news that someone had been arrested and his family signet ring removed from them. The young lady was being held by Bow Street Runners in London for they'd arrested her just as she got off the ferry in Dover. He was glad he and his mother had decided to visit their town house in London and he didn't even bother finishing up his meal but was out like a shot. He hurriedly saddled his horse and took off.

“Wait for me,” Amelia called out to no avail. She sighed and asked one of the servants to prepare a carriage for her. She also couldn't eat anything until she was sure the ring was back in safe custody.

Richard entered the precinct of the Bow Street Runners and identified himself even though most of the law enforcers knew him since he'd been frequenting the place in his search for the family heirloom. “Where is she?”

“Be patient, your grace. The ring is in our custody as is the young lady. We held her so you could question her.”

“Thank you.” Richard received the ring and clutched it in his palm, feeling very emotional all of a sudden. He couldn't believe that the ring had been found. “Thank you,” he repeated. “May I see the young lady?”

“This way, your grace.”

Antoine was seated on a hard chair and had laid her head on the small shaky table next to her when the door opened. She shot to her feet and when she saw the tall and distinguished looking man striding into the room, her heart sank. She'd imagined an elderly man to whom she would appeal for her freedom after explaining

everything. This man didn't look like he would be easy to convince.

Richard saw the fleeting emotions on the young lady's face but closed his heart against any feelings of compassion. The young woman looked so innocent and frightened, but if she was an accomplice of the Frenchman, then she was well schooled on how to act innocent.

"What's your name, young lady?"

"Antoine. Antoine Martineau."

Richard recoiled as if he'd been struck. The woman was so beautiful and he'd hoped there was some explanation that would make him understand why she had his family ring. Just hearing that dreadful name was enough to cause him to further harden his heart.

"The accomplice, no doubt," he said disdainfully and felt slightly guilty when he saw the flush on Antoine's face. "Are you any relation of that scoundrel, Emile Martineau?"

"He was my father," she said in a quiet voice, heart sinking. She would get no compassion from this man.

"You will pay for the crimes that you and that man committed."

"Richard!" He was so bent on questioning Antoine that he hadn't heard his mother come in behind him. "Listen to the poor woman first and then make your judgment."

"Mother, it's obvious this woman was Martineau's accomplice. Do you know that she's his daughter?"

"That doesn't give you the right to treat this poor woman badly until you listen to what she has to say." Amelia turned to Antoine. "Young lady, can you tell me how you came to be in possession of this ring?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's your grace to you," Richard said rudely, earning himself a glare from his mother. "She is the Duchess of Hampshire."

"Richard, I'll thank you to be silent for a while as I hear what Miss Martineau has to say."

“Thank you.” Antoine felt that even though the duchess looked quite foreboding, there was a softer side to her. “My father was Emile Martineau but I’ve never seen him. I didn’t even know whether he was dead or alive until a few weeks ago when his old trunk was delivered to me in Charente.”

“Where’s that?”

“Normandy. I’ve lived there all my life with my mother who passed away three years ago.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Among my father’s things, I found a journal where my father had written about all the women he deceived and also where he had hidden the items he took from them. It took me some days to finally trace his hiding place but among those things I found this ring.”

“You’re such a little liar,” Richard hissed. “You don’t have any other items on your person and this ring is the only thing you were found with.”

“Richard,” but he ignored his mother.

“She’s nothing more than a thief, mother. Why waste time on her.”

“Silence,” the duchess’s voice was harsh and Richard shut up but sulked, glaring at Antoine. “Miss Martineau, you say you found something else?”

“Yes, mam,” Antoine reached down and opened her valise and picked up one of her dresses. She ripped the hem and seam and put the items on the table. One by one, she tore her clothes and placed the items on the table until she was done. “In the journal which I have,” she reached under her clothes and pulled out the journal. “My father indicated which particular item he took from whom. Some he sold to finance his wicked ventures, but everything else is there.”

Richard couldn’t believe his eyes and he could see that his mother was equally stunned.

“Please, I only want to return these things to the owners. Will you help me?”

“How do we know that you aren’t deceiving us? All these items have to be authenticated that they aren’t replicas and you have the real items.”

“Very well then.” Antoine felt really tired but relieved that she no longer was the custodian of the precious items.

Showing Mercy

Amelia was silent all the way home and her son got concerned. “Ma, what’s wrong?”

“That poor girl,” she said. “She took a great risk carrying all those precious gems from France to this place, and the best we could do was to have her locked up in jail. What kind of people are we, Richard?”

“Upright citizens, Ma. We don’t know that she is telling the truth. What if she and her father sold the genuine things to throw everyone off track, he had her bring the fake ones here?”

“You heard the girl. She’s never seen her father and her desire is to see that everything that was stolen is restored back to its owners.”

“Do you believe such a cock and bull story, Ma?”

“Interestingly enough, it’s too absurd to be a lie. I don’t like what we’ve done.”

“It’s the right thing to do, mother. We have to find out the truth before feeling sorry for that woman.”

“You really are a hypocrite, Richard. Your own aunt with her bare hands picked up her jewelery and the family ring and handed them over to a scoundrel, yet you showed her a lot of compassion. Yet here is this young woman, who took a great risk and brought back the stolen items and even more belonging to others, yet you treat her with so much disdain. She didn’t have to. A wicked person would have taken it as an inheritance from her father and disappeared forever. Instead, Antoine Martineau has come all this way to make restitution and like the good English citizens that we are, we had her put in jail. It’s just not right.”

Richard knew that arguing with his mother would get him nowhere so he let it go. He would get to the bottom of the whole issue and

see if the woman deserved to be cleared or judged.

* * *

For the next few days, Antoine was surprised when Amelia visited her in jail every single day. She brought her fresh food each time she came and even paid the jailer to get her out of the crowded cell into a private one. She also told Antoine about her sister-in-law and what her father had done to the poor woman, leading to her premature death.

"I'm really sorry you have to go through this," she told her. "My son insists on doing his investigations but the moment you're cleared, we will get you out of this place."

"Thank you, your grace."

"You really are a good child and all will be well."

Richard felt slightly ashamed when the investigators he sent brought him back the information that cleared Antoine of any wrong doing. The jeweler who was called in pronounced that all the articles that Antoine had brought were genuine and none had been replicated. He realized that he would have to eat humble pie and get the poor girl out of prison.

His mother would insist on making restitution and he sighed as he walked into the private cell.

"Miss Martineau, I come bearing good news." If he expected any sort of reaction from Antoine, he was disappointed. She fixed her blue eyes on him, giving him an unwavering stare that made him feel uncomfortable. She had a way of looking at a person that unnerved them, much like his mother. "Your name has been cleared and the items you brought are all genuine. We shall find a way of returning them to their owners."

Antoine merely shrugged. What did he expect her to say or do? She was innocent and knew it from the beginning so he really wasn't giving her any new information.

"I've come to take you home with me so that we can make up for

the time you've spent in incarceration."

That was when she reacted. "The nerve," she said through clenched teeth. "You're the last person I would ever go anywhere with. After treating me like a common criminal you now come in here all apologetic and remorseful? No thank you, I will stay right here and if this is where my days on earth will end, so be it," and saying so, she turned her back on him.

Richard was stunned and speechless. He tried to plead with Antoine for he knew his mother wouldn't give him rest, but she didn't even turn around to look at him.

"Do you know that you're being disrespectful to me and I'm a duke."

"I'm already in prison, what more can they do to me? Hang me?"

"Don't say that. You're free to go and since you're a stranger in England, we would like to take care of you."

"I've already tasted of the hospitality of the English. Thank you for your kind offer but no thank you. When I leave here, I'll be on the first ferry back to France where I belong."

Free At Last

It was Amelia who finally convinced Antoine to go home with them and she smiled when Richard practically fell over himself to make her comfortable. The journey from London to Hampshire was long and she was asleep for most of the way because she'd barely slept since setting foot in England.

She didn't know what to expect when she got to the family seat in Hampshire, but it definitely wasn't the royal treatment. Everyone made a fuss over her and she felt awed and humbled at the same time.

"You deserve all good things to come your way," Amelia told her. "You've had a very hard life through no fault of your own, and if there's anything I can do to make it easier from now on, all you have to do is ask."

"My greatest desire is to see that those gems, I brought back, are restored to their rightful owners, and also I would really like to trace my mother's family."

"Have you ever met any of them?"

"No, my lady. Mama left England nearly twenty years ago and never returned at all. She died three years ago without ever reconciling with her family. But she told me she was from a small town called Shepherds Cove in Lancashire. Her family name is Cummings and she told me it wasn't a very common name."

"My son will do all he can to find out whether your mother's family members are still alive and we'll help you to reunite with them."

"Thank you very much."

"May I ask a favour from you?"

"Yes, my lady."

“The French language has always fascinated me and over the years I tried to learn it. Will you teach me? Of course, I will pay you for your efforts.”

“No, ma’am. I’m already enjoying so much of your hospitality and will be very happy to tutor you. That’s the work I was doing back in Charente to earn my living. Mama taught me English and good French.”

“You speak very good English, but can this be between us? I’d like people to think you’re a long lost relative from France who doesn’t understand English. This will stop them from asking you all manner of questions for our neighbours and friends can be quite nosy.”

“Ma, you’ll frighten Miss Antoine into thinking we’re a crazy lot of people.”

“I don’t want her harassed in any way, so please just don’t mention anything to anyone and especially Beatrix.”

Antoine saw Richard blushing and her interest was aroused, though she felt a slight pang within. She was being foolish and derided herself. Of course, a handsome duke like Richard Foxworth definitely had a woman in his life, apart from his mother.

“Why don’t you want Beatrix to know that Antoine can understand English? Isn’t that being devious?”

“Whenever that young lady visits her sister in France, she returns with great airs as if she’s the first English woman to speak French.”

“Ma, that’s being unkind.”

“But true, nevertheless.”

Antoine was to find that Lady Amelia always spoke her mind, whether it made people uncomfortable or not. She longed to find out more about this Beatrix lady but didn’t want to look like a nosy person so she held her peace.

She didn’t have to wait for long, for that same evening, Lady Beatrix Manor presented herself to the house for dinner at Richard’s invitation. Antoine was wearing one of Lady Amelia’s old dresses for she had no wardrobe of her own. It was a beautiful silky jade gown that was slightly large for her. They’d not had time to make

any adjustments but she felt warm inside when Richard couldn't seem to take his eyes off her.

But that was until Lady Beatrix floated into the room. She was a sensation and Antoine suddenly felt very dowdy in comparison. The fair lady clearly had her hooks into Richard for she dominated the conversation and wouldn't allow him to address her even for a single moment. Lady Amelia said nothing but observed all that was going on. When dinner was over, she immediately excused herself, leaving Antoine alone.

"Does this girl speak any English?" Antoine nearly smiled because Beatrix apparently believed that she didn't understand her language. "She looks really dowdy and unkempt. That's no way to appear at a duke's table. Didn't your mother tell her?"

"That's enough, Beatrix," Richard said. "It's not polite to talk about others as if they're not present. Miss Martineau is a guest in this house and should be treated with respect."

"Oh my love, please forgive me." Her tone was sickeningly sweet and Antoine wished she was anywhere but here. "I didn't mean any disrespect to your guest. I just wondered why she didn't dress better and yet I know how fussy you are when it comes to etiquette and formality."

"Mother will get her a new wardrobe tomorrow, so you won't have to worry about Miss Martineau's appearance."

Hostile Neighbours

But Beatrix was worried. She had seen Richard stealing glances at that French woman and didn't like what she saw. He was clearly besotted, and yet he was her man. From when they were teenagers, she'd marked Richard Foxworth as her territory and all the ladies in the immediate area and even beyond knew it.

Richard was a handsome man and his family had good money. He would make her a good husband and she'd been sure that he would propose very soon, but that was until the French woman arrived on the scene. Efforts to find out where she was from were futile and she tightened her lips as she paced her room.

"Something has to be done," she muttered, causing her personal maid to stop whatever she was doing.

"Did you say something, my lady?"

"Go back to your duties, Naomi and don't bother me again."

"I'm sorry, my lady."

Yes, she had to get rid of the usurper before her place was taken over. It would take careful planning but it had to be done in a hurry for she had a lot to lose.

* * *

Richard found himself smiling when he thought about Antoine. She was a feisty little thing and years of taking care of herself must have made her very tough. He liked that she didn't seem intimidated by his wealth or fawn over it. She treated him with respect, but not with awe.

If his mother read his thoughts, she would make him say penance

prayers for she didn't like him behaving like a common lout as she would say.

Antoinette Martineau had saved his family's honour and he now had the ring safely in his bedroom drawer. The only person who entered his room was his personal valet and even Geoffrey knew better than to snoop among his things. He had a way of knowing when someone had been in his room and touched his things, so the servants were careful. In any case, they were very honest and had been with the family for a long time. They'd never had any incidences of theft even though the manor had very precious items.

Well, his aunt had taught him a great lesson and he would immediately take inventory of everything in the house and update the records. For one year he'd had his head in the clouds but not anymore. Aunt Edith might have sold more than she actually admitted and the only way he would know for sure was by meticulously going through the books his manager kept and physically checking the items off.

In the guest room, Antoine felt very restless and knew that it all had to do with the duke who was just a few doors away. She was really a simpleton to imagine that she could be in love with Richard Foxworth. What had happened to her convictions never to get involved with a man unless she knew him very well? She'd only known Richard for a few days but her heart had betrayed her.

The Kidnapping

"I really need your help," Beatrix told Antoine and the latter looked at her blankly, like she couldn't understand what was being said. "I'm sorry, I'll ask Richard to translate what I'm saying." She was pulling her words like one would when talking to a child and Antoine really had to fight to keep her composure.

Richard was nowhere to be found and neither was his mother, so Beatrix tried all motions and in the end Antoine nodded as if she understood what was being said. This little game that the dowager duchess had started was amusing but it would have to stop at some point. She couldn't go on pretending that she didn't understand English, and she always had to be careful while she was around Beatrix or the servants. It was exhausting, to say the least.

"My carriage is coming to get us, and will take us to my home so you can help me with some embroidery."

The carriage came but Antoine was surprised when Beatrix didn't board it, but bid the two men in it to drive it away once she had climbed in. They laughed wickedly and Antoine knew she was in trouble. She couldn't believe that she'd been fooled so easily, that was the trouble with being overconfident, she thought.

"The lady directed us to take this one away and keep her for as long as we want," the younger of the two men said in a voice that made Antoine go cold all over. "Foolish broad doesn't understand a single word of English."

"We're not to harm her in any way," the second man said. "Or we shall be hanged and I don't intend for that to happen. The lady said we're to hold her for a day or two and then release her. By then the young duke will have lost all interest for he will believe that she's spoiled goods. But we're not to touch her at all, unless you want your head served to you on a platter."

The first man grumbled but fell silent when the second glared at him. Antoine knew that the best thing for her to do would be to feign innocence all through and act like she had no idea that she was being kidnapped. That would cause the men to lower their guard and at the first chance she got, she would flee.

“Look at her, so innocent and foolish and yet a trap is being set for her.”

“Do you think the lady will get away with it?”

“She’s shrewd and the plan will work. Hiding the signet ring and jewelry and telling the duke that this one has fled with them isn’t difficult. Once he swallows the bait, we shall release her and she won’t be able to defend herself for the items won’t be found. The best place for her will be jail, for the lady said the duke would never forgive her for taking the family ring.”

“I just hope the pay is worth it.”

“It will be.”

The carriage came to a stop outside a small cottage and Antoine raised a curious face to the two men. “Where?” She had to pretend to at least speak a word or two of English. “Where my lady?”

The two men guffawed at her efforts and motioned for her to climb down from the carriage. Even as she climbed down, her eyes were already searching for an escape route. They hadn’t traveled too far from the manor and she was sure she could find her way home even in the dark.

The Search

“Ma, do you think Antoine would do such a heinous thing as Beatrix is claiming?”

“That young girl may have been here for only a few days but she’s as honest as day. I wouldn’t be in a hurry to believe whatever I’m told, especially by Beatrix.”

“Ma, why do you say that?”

“Because from the moment she set eyes on Antoine, she has wanted to get rid of her. I just pray she hasn’t harmed the girl in any way.”

“But what if Antoine has truly run away?” Richard felt as though his heart was breaking. He loved Antoine and had been thinking of a way to express his feelings to her when Beatrix arrived at the house and told him that she’d seen Antoine in the company of two men who seemed like shady characters.

“You can never trust these French,” she’d said. “Make sure that there’s nothing missing from the house. You’ve given that strange woman too much freedom in this house. Why, the other day I found her in your mother’s bedroom as I was on my way to find the duchess.”

“What was she doing there?” Richard frowned, not wanting to believe what he was hearing.

“She was going through your mother’s drawers and when she saw me, she was shocked. Though she said nothing and tried to pretend that she was lost, the guilt was written all over her face.”

And truly when Richard checked his drawers, he found that the family ring was missing and his mother also said some of her jewelery was gone too. He was angry at first and nearly believed what Beatrix had told him but then paused for a while. Why would Antoine bring him the ring all the way from Paris and then steal it once again? It just didn’t make sense and instead of getting the

village constable to come and investigate like Beatrix demanded, he decided to carry out his own investigation.

“I don’t trust Beatrix but since nobody saw her leaving with Antoine, I’ll give her the benefit of the doubt,” Amelia said. “I pray that the girl is alright.”

“Me too, mother,” Richard was clearly upset and his state of discomfort made his mother smile inwardly. She’d come to love Antoine and knew that the young lady would make a good wife for her son. That he was disturbed meant that he had feelings for her, and he was also willing to give her a chance to redeem herself.

“Antoine will come home, she must come home where it is safe,” Amelia said, praying that the girl was alright.

Escaping From The Captors

The two men snored like sows and Antoine wondered what kind of guards they were supposed to be. She couldn't sleep because she didn't trust the younger man not to attack her as the older one slept.

They'd pushed her into the second room of the cottage and kept the door shut but not locked and she kept expecting one of them, mostly the younger one to walk in and begin harassing her. She wasn't even offered supper though she heard them eating and her stomach growled in protest. The last meal she'd had was a mid morning snack with the duchess.

What was Richard thinking about her right now? Would he believe Beatrix when she told him that Antoine had stolen his ring and some of his mother's jewelery? Would the duchess defend her in the light of these new allegations?

What had she ever done to Beatrix to merit such unkindness, she wondered. If it was all about the duke, he barely acknowledged her unless his mother was present. The two of them suited each other with their snobbish ways, but a small voice within her protested. Richard was no snob, he was just brought up differently from her. But would he bother looking for her or would he believe that she had run away with his property?

She couldn't stay here and wait for trouble to come to her. Escaping through the door was out of the question for she might wake the men up, so she turned her attention to the bolted window. Touching one of the boards, she nearly cried out in joy when it came apart in her hand. This was an old wood cutter's cottage and in a state of disrepair. The two men probably thought she was one of those delicate women who couldn't take care of herself.

The window creaked and she quickly left it alone, for fear of waking the sleeping men. She waited for a short while but when no

one came, gathered her courage once again and pushed the window wider and scrambled out. Those wild adventures with her charges back in Charente were paying off. The three boys, now young men had taught her how to climb trees, jump over fences and even ride without a saddle. She crouched beneath the window and waited to hear a shout but nothing happened once again and she crept along the wall until she reached where the two horses had been tethered.

Thank goodness for her life in the French countryside for she could ride very well and was soon on her way. She got lost a couple of times before finding the road that led to the house. Stopping the horse a distance away, she got down and went the rest of the way on foot, leading the horse. He was a gentle gelding and she tethered him to a tree then used the kitchen door, which she found open. Her first stop was the duchess's room.

Amelia thought she was dreaming when she saw Antoine standing before her. "What happened to you, child?"

"I got kidnapped by two men but managed to escape. They believed that I couldn't understand English so they spoke of their plans."

"I don't understand how you could get into a carriage with people you don't know. Don't you know that you could have been badly harmed?"

"It was Beatrix who made me believe that she needed my help with some embroidery and we were going to her home. When I got into the carriage, she immediately dismissed it."

"I wonder how none of our servants saw what was happening."

"They must have thought that it was normal for I didn't seem to be under any kind of restraint or stress. I walked to the carriage myself and got in so they didn't think that anything was wrong."

"Where are these men that took you? Do you think you can lead the constable to them?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wait here then, let me get Richard and tell him what has happened."

Richard listened to Antoine and when she was done, did a

surprising thing. Right before his mother, he pulled her into his arms. "I'm glad you weren't harmed in any way, for tomorrow people would have been hanged. I had determined that I was going to force Beatrix to tell me what she knew."

"Richard, we're wasting time and it will soon be morning. If those men wake up and find Antoine gone, they will know she has escaped and she'll never be safe. Get some men and go and arrest them right now."

"A good thing my two friends who are Bow Street Runners are at the village inn. A few days ago, I asked them to come to Hampshire so they could help trace Antoine's mother's family. I was waiting for morning to also ask them to help me search for her."

"Our servants are trustworthy so send one of them to get those law officers as Antoine shows you where she was held. When the Bow Street Runners get to that cottage, bring Antoine back here yourself."

"I'm never letting her out of my sight again, Mother. You can be sure of that. But we have to keep her hidden for a while so I can set a trap for Beatrix. I want to see what she'll tell me tomorrow."

"This has been a very unfortunate incident which might have turned out very badly but for Antoine's bravery." The duchess hugged Antoine. "I'm glad you're safe, dear girl."

* * *

Capturing the two kidnappers was easy, but getting Beatrix to incriminate herself would be something else. Richard decided that he wouldn't reveal that the men had been arrested until he had made her spill out what she knew.

So the men were held in one of the back rooms, bound and gagged and under the watchful eye of the two Bow Street Runners.

The next morning, Beatrix came in just as the village constable was also coming in. "It's a good thing you're here, sir," she told him. "There's been trouble and I kept asking Richard to send for you but he was hesitant."

“What seems to be the problem, my lady?”

“There’s a French woman who was staying here. She stole Richard’s ring and Lady Amelia’s jewelery and ran away. You have to find her and see that she pays for her crimes. You can never trust strangers.”

“Is that right, your grace?” the constable turned to Richard.

“Indeed it is as Lady Beatrix reports,” he said evasively.

“Do I detect a note of doubt in your voice, your grace?”

“I’d just like for Lady Beatrix to tell you where she was when she saw Antoine running away.”

Beatrix frowned, looking sharply at Richard. “Are you doubting my word now, your grace?”

“No, my lady, but in the time since you reported her missing, I got contrary news to what you told me yesterday.”

Beatrix looked uncomfortable and Richard wanted to smile but kept a straight face. “Even the duchess confirmed that her jewelery is missing.”

“Mama told me that there were some pieces that she’d taken to the goldsmith for adjusting.”

“I’m sure some others are missing from her drawer,” Beatrix insisted and when she glanced at Richard and saw the strange look on his face, she knew that her secret was out. But how, she’d been very careful and paid the two men some good money. They owed her and couldn’t betray her. She had to get out of here and find out what was going on.

But before she could rise up, the door opened and her two accomplices were pushed into the room. Beatrix turned as white as a sheet and Amelia thought she was about to swoon.

“What’s the matter, my lady?” The constable was clearly the only one who didn’t know what was going on. “Would you like a glass of water?”

“Please,” she said in a hoarse voice, looking anywhere but at the men.

Richard took over. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" He demanded of the two men. They were properly cowered and the older one pointed at Beatrix.

"Your grace," his voice trembled. "That is the lady who told us to take the French woman away from here. We didn't intend to harm the lady in any way but were only holding her for a day or two. We would have released her unharmed. Upon my soul, your grace, we didn't touch a single hair on her head."

"The fact that you took Miss Martineau away from here against her will is tantamount to harming her. You will hang for your crimes."

"Mercy, your grace," the younger man cried out. "We intended no harm but were enticed with money. The lady said she had taken your family ring and your mother's jewelry so you would think it was the French lady who did it."

"You lie," Beatrix screamed but Richard only raised an eyebrow. She rushed to his side and clutched his arm. "Please say that you believe me, my love. I would never do anything sinister like that. It must be that woman who put these men up to it and she's no doubt laughing behind all our backs as she returns to France."

Richard's response was turn. "Antoine, please do come out here."

For the second time that early morning, Beatrix turned quite pale.

Antoine stepped out from behind the closed door and Richard held out his hand. She walked to him without any hesitation. He pulled her close and she nearly stopped breathing. What was going on?

"Constable, this woman clearly intended to harm my beloved."

"Your beloved?" Both women looked at him in astonishment.

"Yes," he kissed Antoine's forehead. "You are my beloved," he turned to Beatrix. "This French woman speaks fluent English and you've been caught in your own lie. Now, before this gets out of hand, may I have the ring that you stole as well as my mother's jewelry?"

Beatrix tried to deny it but when she realized that she was cornered, indicated one of the large vases in the living room. "I dropped them in there and would have returned them."

"That was very unkind of you," Amelia's tone and look were disapproving. "I don't ever want to see you in my house again." She rang the bell for a servant who she instructed and a few minutes later, he returned with all the missing items.

"You intended to harm an innocent woman and all for what? Because you believe yourself to be in love with me?"

"But I love you, Richard."

"Beatrix," he spoke patiently as one would to a child. "We've been through this before and I told you that I love you as a sister, never as a wife or lover. You're beautiful and can make a good match with someone else but not me. What possessed you to do something so terrible and think you could get away with it?"

"I'm sorry, but I love you so much and didn't think. Please forgive me."

"I forgive you but on one condition."

"Anything, Richard."

"What you've done could cause you to be shunned by society but I won't subject you to such humiliation. Instead, these two friends of mine and the constable will escort you and these two men to London. These men will face serious charges and you will be taken to Dover to catch the ferry to France. I'm sure your sister will be happy to receive you and make sure that you never set foot in England again, not while I live. For if you do that, I will prosecute you for there are enough witnesses here for you to be charged with a very serious crime. Kidnapping someone and planting false evidence against them is punishable by a long term in jail or hanging."

"Please no, I won't repeat it again," Beatrix was weeping.

"You're not to be trusted and for as long as you're still here, my love will never be safe."

Antoine thought she would fly because her heart soared. Richard loved her, else he wouldn't have called her his love. Was this what it felt like to be in love, she wondered. It was as if everything was bright and shone that morning.

The three partners in crime were taken away. Amelia come over to Antoine. "I'm so happy that you're safe," she hugged her.

"Thank you, my lady."

"Don't you think you should start getting used to calling me Mother, seeing as you're soon going to be my son's wife?"

"He hasn't asked me yet," Antoine retorted good naturedly.

"Then he better do so or my patience will soon run out. Don't you think it's about time that he settled down?"

"It's as you say, my lady."

"I'm right here," Richard protested, a huge smile on his face. He took Antoine's face between his hands. "We've really treated you badly since you set foot in this country and I want to say how sorry we are, my darling."

"All's well," Antoine murmured.

"You know that I fell in love with you the very first time I set my eyes on you, but I was so disappointed because I thought you were Mr. Martineau's accomplice. Still, I couldn't get you out of my head and one of the reasons I kept you in prison was so you wouldn't return to France before I had found out what was going on."

"Please forgive us, my dear."

"Mother, there's nothing to forgive."

"The women in my life talk too much," Richard glared at the two of them. "This day shouldn't go on before you give me an answer. I can see that Antoine is really exhausted from all the excitement and I'd like for her to rest. But not before I get the answer I seek."

"You haven't asked me a question," Antoine said cheekily. Amelia knew she had found the perfect woman for her son. This was just the woman to keep Richard on his toes but also who loved him genuinely.

A growl came from Richard's throat, earning him a fierce look from his mother. "Really Richard, growling like a bear?"

"I'm sorry Ma, but please let me complete what I have begun."

“Go ahead”

He nodded in satisfaction on getting his mother's approval. “Antoine, I love you so much and want you to be my duchess. I promise to take care of you for the rest of my life. Will you marry me, my darling?”

“Try and stop me.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

“Richard, take it any way it's given to you. At least, I didn't hear her say no.”

“Mother, let me just put him out of his misery.” She raised herself on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. “Your grace, it will be an honour to be your wife.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you and you're the one man that I can't live without.”

And Amelia clapped her hands cheerfully.

EPILOGUE – Making Restitution

All the jewelery that Antoine had brought from her father's vault was eventually returned to the owners, who couldn't believe it. They tried to offer her rewards but she wouldn't take anything. "My father wronged you and for that I beg for your forgiveness. Please forgive him for he is facing his judgment." Because she was so contrite, all those she spoke too immediately said they had forgiven the ills done to them.

Antoine left the house one afternoon when Richard was in his study with the estate manager and his mother was sleeping. She walked to the family burial ground and stood before Edith Foxworth's grave. "I know that it's too late and you lost your life because of my father," she shook her head sadly. "I'm so sorry for the pain you must have gone through and just wish you were here so I could tell all this to your face. Please forgive us Lord, don't count this sin against me and my descendants to come."

Perhaps the most joyous occasion was when Lord and Lady Richard Foxworth as well as the Dowager Duchess made their way to Somerset to see Lady Abigail Birch, the Duchess of Dorchester and returned her stolen jewelery.

She wept in her husband's arms as she thanked them for their kindness.

One thing put a blight on an otherwise joyous season for Lady Antoine Foxworth. The fact that the Bow Street Runners who were charged with finding her mother's relatives brought back a sad report.

"The only Cummings alive are distant relatives and not by blood but by marriage. I'm sorry, your grace, Lady Antoine's relatives are long dead."

And it was her turn to weep for the relatives she would never know

and her mother's broken life and dreams.

The wise duke let his duchess cry her grief out and soon she was smiling once again and it seemed as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud.

"I will never know my family but I have found a new family now," she kissed her husband and hugged her mother-in-law. "This is the time for me to begin a new generation."

"And we're honoured to be a part of it," Lady Amelia the dowager said.

"My beloved wife, you'll never be alone again."

"Thank you for loving me, Richard."

"And you for loving me, Antoine."

* * *

The Forgotten Bride for the New Duke

Sweet Regency Romance

“A Truth Universally Acknowledged”

Mr. Samuel Lloyd was sitting in his study when his wife burst in the door.

“You will never guess!” she declared, her eyes shining. “Lord Andrew Payton is dead!”

Slowly, Mr. Lloyd looked up from the book of sermons propped on the desk before him. “I have already heard about the Duke.” He adjusted his spectacles with one hand and sighed. “And is this somehow a cause for celebration in your eyes, my dear?”

“How vexing you are!” his wife sighed, crossing the room to the window. She was a plump woman, who had been the loveliest face in Hampshire in her day. Though the pool of competitors for that title in Brunswick Square was somewhat larger, and the course of a score of years had faded her bloom, Mrs. Lloyd never forgot that fact. “You know that the estate and title must pass to Edgar now!”

“I am sure that the orchards of Thurrock could not be in finer hands,” Mr. Lloyd said idly, returning his gaze to the faded print on the page.

“No, to be sure!” Relieved that her husband was at last following her train of thought, Mrs. Lloyd planted herself in the chair opposite his own and leaned forward, hoping to catch his eye. “Such a fine young man! Handsome, rich, refined ... I could not have hoped for a better match for our dear Bella!”

“Bella?” Mr. Lloyd repeated, with a frown, but his wife was gazing towards the window now, lost in happy meditations of the future.

“He is already half in love with her, of course, so it will take just a little nudge here, and a nudge there ... And Bella will be Duchess of Thurrock by midsummer!”

"Is no time to be allowed for the Paytons to mourn?" her husband asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, Mr. Lloyd, you are so sentimental!" Mrs. Lloyd gave an indulgent laugh. "Lord Payton was old and infirm, and they have been waiting for him to die for the past ten years. But of course, it is a family failing, to stay longer than you are wanted: only yesterday morning, Lady Charlotte sat with me above an hour, as though I had nothing else to do! I could not take out my work: it would have had such an odd appearance, but then, perhaps it is not right to stand on ceremony with such old friends ..."

"My dear," Mr. Lloyd interrupted, "was there something else that you wished to tell me?"

His wife stared at him in amazement. "Really, Mr. Lloyd! Are not you a little pleased for Bella? One would think you had no interest in her future at all, but then, I suppose, it is all the same to you whether Edgar wants to marry Bella or Jane."

"I can assure you, my dear," said Mr. Lloyd, quietly, "that it is not all the same to me."

"We must invite the Paytons to tea as soon as they are out in society again," his wife went on, not attending. "Poor Charlotte will be wanting for company. I wonder if she will wear bombazine or crepe? And it will cheer Edgar so to see Bella ..."

At this juncture, there was a sound very like a squeal of excitement from just outside the door. Both parents pretended not to hear it, for it came from young Bella Lloyd herself, who had posted herself in that very spot on seeing her mother enter the study. She did not pay that proverbial price of eavesdropping, in hearing ill of herself; for if there were any defect in character that took away from the perfection of her youngest daughter, Mary Lloyd had never seen it. Bella was everything she herself had been in her youth, and more: she was handsome, accomplished, and graceful.

The servants of the Lloyds could have borne witness to that grace as Bella flew from one end of the house to the other, her hands lifting her skirts as she called, "Jane! Jane!"

She at last found her older sister in the hall, giving directions to the

housekeeper's little nephew, who was clutching a bouquet of lilies. Jane Lloyd was clad in a plain work dress, her cheeks ruddy with exertion and her black hair flat and dull. At one-and-twenty, her sister could hardly be called an old maid just yet, but she might as well have been one, Bella noted scornfully, for all the effort she put into her appearance. "I have been looking for you for an age!"

"They're for next door," Jane told the servant boy quietly. "Make sure to go through the back door, quiet as you can. The Paytons must not be disturbed at this time."

"Go on, shoo," Bella said. As soon as the little boy had scuttled away, she reached out and seized her sister's arm. Though the elder by two years, Jane was slightly shorter, and where Bella was plump and pretty, she was thin and pale.

"Jane, I need your help. You must come with me to Wilkinson's, right away. There is no time to lose."

"I have some things to arrange first, Bella," Jane said faintly. "Cook must be consulted about dinner: I think Mother has forgotten to tell her that the Miss Ellisons will be joining us, and then the pattern must be finished for the new curtains in the drawing room ..."

"That is just the sort of thing I was expecting you to say," her sister said, with a sniff, as she turned away. "Of course, you would choose your silly patterns and your silly friends over me. It comes as no surprise, but I had rather thought that in *my* time of need ..."

"Bella, wait!" Jane said with a sigh as her sister moved languidly for the staircase. "What do you mean?"

Her younger sister whirled about, all smiles once more. "What do you think? I'm going to be married!"

On such a fine summer day in Brunswick Square, many eyes were drawn to the two young ladies striding down its main thoroughfare. Of course, it was the taller one that they most often noticed, as she chatted and beamed and positively glowed.

"I have not even begun to think of my trousseau, for, you know, that would be presuming too much, as no offer has been made yet. Though I should rather like a light silk like that lady's over there—do you see her, Jane, just gone by? And I shall be needing new

gloves, too, of course, though I haven't given it more than a moment's thought, I assure you."

"Who is to be the lucky man?" Jane asked, when she at last had the chance to get a word in. She had listened, half-amused and half-weary, to the unbroken flow of her sister's chatter all the way from their house. "Mr. John Alderton?"

"Oh, Jane, you are so droll! As though I would consider *him*."

"You danced three dances with him in the Assembly Rooms last week," Jane pointed out.

"Only because there was no other man under thirty there! Of course, the old ladies think themselves very clever, making matches everywhere they look. They have nothing better to be doing, at these dances, but I do declare that anyone with as little to say as Mr. Alderton ought not to venture out in society at all."

"Mr. Lawrence Pitchford, then?"

A clear peal of laughter rose into the warm summer air as Bella Lloyd threw her head back, almost dislodging her bonnet. Jane reached out and caught it as her sister composed herself once more. "Really, Jane! I wouldn't just be marrying him, but his mother and sisters, too! I declare, he knows more about buying muslins than *they* do."

"Then who ..." Jane started, but her sister gestured wildly as they drew up to Wilkinsons' haberdashery.

"You mustn't ask me any more, Jane! It wouldn't be proper, you know. No names shall pass between us. Though I *can* tell you ..." In an exaggerated whisper as the door swung open before them, "that he's a very fine—"

Both sisters fell utterly silent as Lord Edgar Payton emerged from the door and tipped his hat to them. He was carrying a small box in one hand, and although his countenance wanted color, nothing else outwardly told of his recent loss. His fair, curled hair had not turned white in shock, and he smiled at them as he always had. At least, that was as much as Bella could discern, though Jane saw more behind the smile. It was she who recalled her manners first. Bowing her head to conceal all that she felt on seeing his misery,

she took a quick step forward and curtsied.

“Edgar. We are so very sorry at home. We are all thinking of you, and Lady Charlotte ...”

“Thank you, Jane,” Edgar said quietly, and as their eyes met, his smile faded. “We are indeed lucky, to have such friends as you and your father.”

“Oh, Edgar!” With a wail of distress, Bella Lloyd threw herself forward and seized Edgar’s black-gloved hand. Where Jane had only bowed her head, she bent almost double, her bonnet tumbling off her head again so that her shining black hair came loose. Her shoulders shook with suppressed sobs, and her muffled cry soon followed. “It is so very dreadful!”

Lord Edgar Payton was fumbling in the pockets of his greatcoat for a handkerchief. He threw a helpless look at Jane, who discreetly handed him one of her own, and then, in tentative tones, to the young lady who was still sobbing, “Miss Bella?”

With a shuddering sigh, Bella Lloyd reached out and accepted the handkerchief. “I am sorry,” she whispered as she dabbed at the corners of her eyes. “I was so very fond of your father: for a moment I could not help myself.”

“Your feelings do you credit,” said Edgar Payton gently. “But we must exert ourselves: we must not allow ourselves to be overpowered.”

“Of course, you are right. And if there is anything we can do to help you in your grief ...” Slowly, Bella Lloyd lifted her head and fixed her great blue eyes on the young man before her. She blinked, once, and then dropped her gaze once more. “... please, remember that we are your friends.”

“Thank you.” Lord Edgar Payton appeared very moved. He glanced at Jane, who had stood in silent contemplation throughout her sister’s display, and then, a little bashfully, “You have already done so much. The—er—flowers were appreciated; my mother was very touched. Such a kind gesture ...”

“I am so glad that you received them,” Bella said feelingly. “I hoped that they might ease her Ladyship’s pain a little.”

Edgar's eyes widened in surprise. "Forgive me: it was you, Miss Bella, who arranged to have them sent over?"

"Of course," Bella said at once. "I remembered that Lady Charlotte has always loved ... erm ..."

"Lilies," Jane murmured out of the corner of her mouth, but neither of her two companions heard her: they were too busy gazing at one another.

"How kind," said Edgar Payton at last, without taking his eyes off Bella Lloyd's face. "How very kind." Then he glanced around, as the shop door swung open behind them again, and gestured to the box in his hand. "I—er—I must be getting back. I told Mother I would step out just for a moment, to get her a length of crepe for her cap."

"How very lucky she is to have such a dutiful son in you," said Bella softly.

"Er—yes. She is. I mean—thank you. Very kind. Er—good day." With another tip of his hat and a rather confused bow, Lord Edgar Payton had passed them, and the two Lloyd sisters gazed after him.

"Well," Bella said at last, blowing out her breath. She cast a sidelong glance at Jane before squeezing past her into the shop in a rustle of skirts. "I suppose you think I was too forward."

"I was not aware that you had been quite so fond of Lord Andrew Payton," Jane said carefully, following her inside.

"Nor was I," said Bella, with a laugh. She took back the bonnet that her sister handed her and laced the strings about her neck. "Now, where should we look first? Oh dear, I look quite ill, don't I?" She stopped by a round mirror and pinched some color back into her cheeks. "There, that's better. Crying simply doesn't suit me, you know, Jane; it never has. I must marry a man who will never make me cry."

Selecting the suitable material for the gown that was to rival all others was no simple undertaking, and Bella Lloyd had soon thrown herself into the process so wholeheartedly that she did not notice her sister's silence. Jane did not work up the courage to speak again until her arms were piled high with bolts of fabric that had been selected for consideration by Bella, at which point, feeling that she

now had a screen behind which she might conceal her reaction, she ventured, "The young man who has captured your fancy, Bella ... is he—"

"No names will pass between us, Jane, remember!" Bella laughed merrily as she passed from one display to the next, beckoning her sister along with her. "No names, until it is all settled. But I am not so heartless as that: I will give you one clue. He is a very dutiful son." She giggled again, and then seized Jane's arm, giving her such a start that the bolts of fabric nearly toppled over. "Oh, you didn't mind about the flowers, did you? It wasn't a lie, after all; I would have sent some over to Lady Charlotte if I had thought of it, really I would have."

Jane Lloyd did not mind about the flowers, for far greater concerns now seized her mind, and she was silent for the rest of their expedition.

A Night at the Opera

The Lloyds and the Paytons had been friends for years.

Despite the little disparity between the two heads of household—for Lord Andrew was a landowner, and Mr. Lloyd a gentleman of leisure, whose small competence of five hundred a year was just enough to support himself, his wife and their two daughters—there had been a bond of friendship between the two neighboring families in Brunswick Square for as long as Jane Lloyd could remember. Seldom did a day pass where one party did not meet the other, whether it was to drink tea, dine, or play whist.

In the fortnight that succeeded Lord Andrew Payton's passing, the Lloyds found themselves, for the first time, deprived of that company on which they had always counted. Their mornings were long, their evenings stupid and dull, as frequently lamented by Mrs. Lloyd and Bella, neither of whom had ever learned to employ themselves in the absence of entertainment.

For Jane, the impatience occasioned by their friends' absence was of a different kind; she was in constant suspense, relying only on what the servants could tell her of the Paytons' movements how Edgar and his mother were faring. She heard one day that they were returned to Thurrock, and the next that they were in town again, and with each piece of news, she was reminded that she could do very little to support them.

As such, on hearing that the Paytons were to attend the opera one Sunday night toward the end of May, the ladies of the Lloyd household were all aflutter. While parading through her dressing room in her new gown, Bella declared several times that she had not a stitch to wear; Mrs. Lloyd was so overcome with excitement that she frequently found it necessary to sit down and order her smelling salts from her lady's maid, and Jane was grateful when the Ellisons arrived.

Miss Sophia Ellison, the eldest of the two sisters, was at pains to assure her friend from the moment of their arrival in Brunswick Square that there was room for all of them to travel together, but Mrs. Lloyd and her younger daughter, not being as far advanced in their toilette as Jane, it was quickly settled that those two would follow in their own carriage later. Happier in such an arrangement than they could have been in any other, the three young ladies settled back against their cushions as the carriage set out for Covent Garden.

"I wonder how he will look," sighed Jane as she turned her face out the window, and the two sisters sitting across from her exchanged significant glances. The eldest Lloyd sister's attachment to Edgar Payton was no secret amongst them; they had known of it for as long as they had been friends, and for years had been anxious to promote it.

"It seems very strange to me," Sophia now said, "that the Paytons should appear in society so soon after Lord Andrew's passing. Particularly since I know Lady Charlotte detests the opera."

"I think they must have their reasons," Maria said significantly, and ignoring her sister's warning look, leaned forward eagerly, her eyes fixed on Jane. "Lord Edgar will be looking to settle down, now that he has inherited the estate."

"You don't know that."

"But this is our chance!" Maria protested. "Jane, you must give him every encouragement that you can; one cannot be too timid in these cases, you know, and ..." She stopped short, yelping as her sister pinched her bare arm. Across from them, Jane's head had been dipping more towards her chest with every word, and now her head was fully bowed as she whispered,

"I cannot do it."

"Why not?" exclaimed Maria, but Sophia elbowed her.

"Listen to me, Jane." Leaning forward, she fixed her eyes on her friend's. "I know that Bella might have her eye on Edgar at the moment. But that *will* change. Anyone can see that she is just interested in the title. She doesn't love him the way you do. And as

soon as you have the courage to make him see your affection, he cannot ignore it.”

Slowly, Jane Lloyd raised her grey eyes to regard Sophia. They were full of tears, and her dark eyelashes shivered. “Please don’t be kind, Sophia. You *know* that she is more beautiful than me.”

Sophia opened her mouth, then closed it again, giving her sister a look of appeal.

“Bella Lloyd has a different beau every week,” Maria said eagerly. “You know this to be true, Jane. She’s worse than *me*.” As her sister gave a most unladylike snort, “She’ll grow tired of Edgar soon, and move on to someone else.”

“We’re here,” said Jane flatly, as the lights of Covent Garden opera house became visible through the window. The carriage came to halt, and a moment later, the door was thrown open by a young gentleman with a dark countenance and a roving eye.

“Can I be of some assistance to you lovely young ladies?” he said grandly, and Maria gave a squeal in response.

“*Hubert!* You’re back!” She practically leapt out of the carriage into his arms, and the older Ellison sister turned to give Jane one last look before she followed her.

“Have courage, Jane,” she whispered, squeezing her friend’s hand. “You have loved him for years. That must count for something.”

“Ahem-*hem*. Are you going to keep me waiting all night?” their male companion demanded. He was still poised at the door, his gloved hand extended, and Sophia rolled her eyes as she rose in a rustle of green silk to take it, shaking back the single red curl that fell over her forehead.

“No, though that *would* be more amusing than spending two hours in a stuffy opera box.”

“You know, it’s a great pity no one ever taught you manners, Miss Ellison,” said Hubert Worthington indignantly, as soon as he had handed Sophia out. “Here I am, an eligible young bachelor of great fortune and *unparalleled* good looks, and the finest hunter in Surrey to boot. I could be escorting any young lady into the opera tonight,

and yet I chose you.”

“A privilege indeed,” said Sophia Ellison dryly as she turned from him to kiss the cheek of the young lady standing beside him. “Kitty, darling. How was the country?”

“I missed you all so much!” Kitty exclaimed. She was dark-haired like her brother, and her voice had a peculiar quality to it which always made her sound as though she were close to tears, even when she was in good humor. “Mama and Papa paid no attention to me, and Hubert spent all his time out riding.” She rested her head on Jane’s shoulder as the latter put an arm about her waist, and Sophia turned to give Hubert a reprimanding glance.

“Now, Miss Ellison, if you’re not careful, I shall abandon you for more pleasant company.”

“I’m sure you’re free to do as you like,” Sophia retorted, even as he offered his arm to her. She took it, and as they fell into step with one another behind the others, added in a lower voice, “Have you heard?”

“About Bella Lloyd’s new conquest? Naturally.” Hubert Worthington cast a glance at Jane’s white-clad form, moving in and out of view among the crowds moving into the opera house. “Edgar has spoken of no one else every time I’ve visited Brunswick Square.”

“I feared as much,” said Sophia gravely.

“But in his state, any young lady with half as much beauty as Bella Lloyd has could turn his head. And Bella Lloyd is beautiful. I hoped, at one time, to make her better acquaintance; however, she never spared a glance for me.” With a rueful smile, Hubert glanced at his companion, and was somewhat surprised by her violent reaction as she stopped altogether, staring up at him.

“What if you were to try your hand again?”

“I beg your pardon?” When she did not reply, Hubert laughed. “Dear Miss Ellison, you forget that Edgar is my oldest friend, and I would *never* interfere with any young lady of his.”

“But I’ve just had an idea,” Sophia Ellison said slowly, as they resumed walking. “Bella Lloyd is too fond of being admired to ever

settle her attentions on one man. What better way to make Edgar realize that than to let him see it with his own eyes?"

* * *

The opera being performed that evening was a charming one, with perfectly delectable music, as everyone in the bored audience kept reminding one another throughout the first act. Indeed, most of the ladies assembled in Covent Garden were such connoisseurs of the opera that they could not refrain from admiring the feathers and finery in which the lead soprano was bedecked, and after a particularly virtuosic solo, paid her the homage of confessing to their friends that they had not understood a single word of it.

When the first interlude came, there was a general sigh of relief, and those in the privileged seats detached their eyes from the action on stage to focus on a much more interesting spectacle: the activity of the occupants of the various boxes around them. The box in which the Lloyd family sat was situated directly across from that of the Paytons, and Mrs. Lloyd and Bella immediately noted that Lord Edgar had vacated his seat. Not long afterward, their curiosity turned to delight when they found him entering their box to pay them the usual civilities. Jane said all that was proper, and then fixed her gaze on her playbill as he sat down with them at her mother's request, and willed her hands not to tremble in her lap.

"A fine performance, is it not?" was Mrs. Lloyd's generous estimation.

"Very fine, indeed, though I confess I am not following much of it," was Lord Edgar's reply. He gave a rueful laugh. "I find my mind is very occupied these days, with plans for the future and arrangements of Father's affairs."

At this, Jane looked up, regarding his downturned profile tenderly. "That is very natural," she said quietly, before her mother plunged on, "Such a pity Mr. Lloyd could not be with us! I did try to persuade him, for he knew you and Lady Charlotte would be in attendance, too, but he said he would prefer to spend a few dull hours in his study than mixing at the opera listening to foreigners.

He is so very contrary! He never likes anything which is not in plain English. This Mozart fellow, Italian, I believe ...” With a glance down at her rumpled playbill,

“He is Austrian, Mama,” Jane interposed gently.

“Hmph! Well, whatever he might be, nothing would persuade Mr. Lloyd to leave his study. Whatever might be in those books of his that is more interesting than mixing in good company, I cannot account for it. But I hope we shall be seeing you and your mother soon for tea.”

“Very soon, I hope,” said Edgar warmly, and, taking full advantage of the opening before Mrs. Lloyd could go off on another speech, turned to her youngest daughter. “Are you enjoying the performance, Miss Bella?”

“Oh! Yes, well, I am excessively fond of music. But I do declare,” with a gay sparkle, “I find all of those disguises a little ridiculous. Could the Count really be so easily deceived?”

“*The Marriage of Figaro* is a comedy,” Jane could not help pointing out at this juncture, as the others laughed. “Of course, *we* know who is beneath those disguises, but the personages in the story do not. It is part of the humor, in the way things play out.”

Rather out of their depth, Mrs. Lloyd and Bella exchanged glances. Lord Edgar, who had turned attentively toward Jane throughout her little speech, smiled affectionately. “I believe Jane may be the only person in this opera house who understands a little of what is going on.”

“Oh, yes!” said Bella kindly. “She has always had a gift for languages. Our governess used to be in raptures about her compositions.” Dropping her eyes in a show of modesty, she added with another laugh, “But I confess *I* was rather a poor scholar. I much preferred to be running about the house or dancing.”

“It has been a long time since I’ve seen you dance,” said Edgar, with a glowing look at her sister which quite sank Jane. She looked down at her playbill once more, as the others began to converse about their impatience for the next ball, and struggled to compose herself. In the midst of this, she became aware of a little scuffle just

outside the curtains of their box.

“Go on,” Sophia Ellison said urgently, as she gave Hubert another shove towards the Lloyds’ box. They were standing out in the corridor, and he was clutching in his hands a bouquet of flowers from the Covent Garden market. “Give them to her.”

“I don’t know,” her companion said doubtfully. “It really goes against every gentleman’s code ...”

“Never mind your gentleman’s codes,” Sophia hissed. “They’ve never stopped you before, have they?”

“But Edgar is already in there.”

“All the better! Then he’ll see firsthand what Bella’s made of. Go on ...”

“What are you two doing?”

“Jane!” Sophia and Hubert turned their guilty faces towards the eldest Lloyd sister, who had slipped out through the curtains and was regarding them with narrowed eyes.

“Who are those for?” she asked, nodding towards the flowers.

“No one!” Hubert gulped, and then Sophia came forward, seizing her friend’s arm.

“Jane, will you come with me to the cloakroom? I don’t want to go alone.” Leading her away before she could protest, Sophia threw a fierce glance over her shoulder at Hubert.

“All right, all right,” he grumbled, and then pushed open the curtains.

If the delight of the Lloyd ladies in finding one eligible young bachelor amongst them had been great, it was increased twofold in the addition of another to their party. Never mind that everyone knew Hubert Worthington had spent more time drinking wine than studying in Oxford, and had barely scraped a pass in his final year. He was charming, and rich, and for mother and daughter alike, those were the only requirements for a pleasant companion.

Hubert, who had not been expecting such a warm reception, found

himself pulled this way and that, and as soon as he could get a word in edgewise, held out the flowers almost like a shield. "For you, dear Miss Bella," he managed to get out, as she turned wondering eyes towards him. "They will be quite becoming with your—er—hair."

"Thank you!" Bella said in her delicious, thrilling voice, as she sniffed the flowers. "Oh, and fresh, too! Edgar, how kind your friend is!" Hubert, chancing a glance towards Edgar, found not the jealous, resentful creature Sophia had hoped: his friend's eyes were actually speaking his gratitude towards him, and as soon as he was able to extricate himself from the continued attentions of the Lloyd ladies, Edgar made his excuses and followed him out.

"I can't thank you enough, Hubert," he said, clapping him on the shoulder, once they had gained a little distance down the corridor, and halted outside another set of curtains, which led down to the lobby. "You're a true friend. I've been so distracted, it didn't occur to me that Bella might be expecting some little gift, some mark of my attention." Wincing, he continued, "If you see me slipping up in any other regard, do not hesitate to tell me."

Hubert stared at his friend, blank and uncomprehending. "Slipping up?"

"Well, you know, I'm such a poor judge of these things," Edgar went on, running a hand through his blond hair. "And with your experience ..."

"Ah! You mean, in wooing ladies." Gathering himself once more, Hubert continued, "Well, if you do have your sights set on Bella Lloyd, I *would* provide a word of caution—"

"I know what you're going to say," Edgar interrupted, with a smile. "I grew up with her, after all." He glanced behind him, towards the box from which they had just emerged, and said after a moment, "But lately—something has changed. I think she really does care for me, Hubert. You should have seen the flowers she sent to the house after Father passed away, so beautifully arranged. She has such a warm heart, so passionate and good-natured."

At a loss for words, Hubert gazed at his friend. He swallowed, deliberated, and at last, asked, "Then—ah—if you really think she

cares for you, perhaps it would be best to take some time ...”

“I don’t want to wait any longer,” Edgar said, all in a rush. “With things the way they are on the estate, I must be sure. And I am. I want to ask her to marry me, Hubert.”

The two friends were conversing in low tones at this point, so that only someone perched right at the other side of the curtain, just out of their view, could have heard the words spoken. Jane Lloyd had the misfortune to be that person, and she paid the price of the eavesdropper where her sister had not. A freezing shock came over her where she stood.

The remainder of the evening passed in a haze of warm colors and loud voices. Jane talked and listened without attending to a thing, and only the jolting motion of the carriage on the road back to Brunswick Square finally woke her from her reverie.

“Jane. Please say something.” Sophia was sitting opposite her, her face stricken. The other ladies were travelling back in the Lloyds’ conveyance, and Jane had her friend to thank for contriving to keep her apart from them, though she could not feel grateful for very much at the moment.

“What do you wish me to say?” Jane said at last, very carefully. Then, as something occurred to her, she looked up at Sophia. “You and Hubert were planning something, were you not?”

Sophia grimaced. “I’m so sorry, Jane. I wanted Edgar to see how Bella really is. I thought if Hubert paid her some attention, it would be obvious to him—but it all went wrong. You must forgive me.”

“Of course, I forgive you,” Jane said gently, “You were acting as a true friend.” She paused, and then continued with greater resolve, “But you must promise me not to interfere any more. Edgar wishes to marry Bella. That is the truth of it, and there is nothing that we can do.”

Tears in her eyes, Sophia reached across and took Jane’s gloved hands in her own, and they were silent for the rest of the carriage ride home.

Mr. Lloyd was engrossed in a particularly incomprehensible passage of Sterne's when the sound of carriage wheels on cobbles drifted up through the open window of his study. Sighing in anticipation of the noise which soon would follow, he was moving to douse the lamp when he heard a quiet step in the landing outside.

"Jane?" he called out. "Is that you?"

There was a pause, and then the reply came. "Yes, Father."

"How was the evening?" Picking up his book, Mr. Lloyd moved to the doorway. "I came across a chapter in *Tristram Shandy* that I thought might amuse you ..." Frowning, he looked up to see that his eldest daughter was already halfway up the staircase to the second floor. "Has something happened?"

Jane Lloyd did not turn. "Nothing to signify. I am a little tired, Father, that is all. Goodnight."

A Diabolical Scheme

The announcement of Lord Edgar Payton's engagement to Miss Bella Lloyd came as no surprise to anyone who knew them; well-wishers and adversaries alike had been primed for the event by the time the news came out. But there were those who belonged to neither party, and who for some time were observing the couple without being able to reach a conclusion about whether or not they suited one another. Mr. Samuel Lloyd was one such person. For, while his wife would have been the first to accuse him of being unfeeling, the happiness of his daughters had ever been his chief concern. However, happiness for Jane and happiness for Bella were two very different things, and after the night at the opera, even one with such a reputation for being as unobservant as Mr. Lloyd could not ignore that his eldest daughter was laboring under a heavy sorrow, which only grew with her younger sister's increasing gaiety.

He was not alone in this uncertainty. Being an eminently practical and sensible woman, Lady Charlotte Payton had no objections, on the score of her husband's recent passing, which might otherwise have delayed the wedding; however, she could not be sure that after such a period of low spirits, Edgar was not just throwing himself headfirst at the first young lady who had been kind to him. Several times she attempted to speak to him about it, but to no avail; her son had always been headstrong, and the more she suggested that he look elsewhere for his bride, the more adamant he became that Bella Lloyd was the bride for him.

At last, his mother gave up the fight, for there were too many other matters to occupy her mind. The wedding ceremony was to be held in the family seat in Thurrock, in the county of Surrey, and, having set the preparations in motion herself for some time beforehand, she removed there a week before the wedding to supervise them in person. Edgar soon followed, with his groomsman Hubert and his sister Kitty, and the bride's family joined them there not long after.

Here Lady Charlotte found an unexpected source of aid in the form of the eldest Lloyd girl.

"I really could not do without her," she declared to Edgar a couple of days before the ceremony, after she had summoned him to her. Thurrock was an estate of generous size, nestled between wooded hills, whose grounds boasted orchards and wide lawns. On the main stretch of grass behind the house, the marquee was being assembled, and through the windows of her drawing room they could make out the small figure of Jane, directing servants this way and that. "She has already managed to get Thomas to repair that leak in the greenhouse roof, and somehow she has contrived to fit an extra table in the marquee to accommodate the Martins."

"I'm grateful, of course," Edgar said with a smile as he looked out the window, "but I'm sure such exertions are not necessary."

"I assure you, dear Edgar, they are," said his mother. "We might have planned a Michaelmas wedding at our leisure, if you and Bella had not been so impatient at the thought of waiting a few more months, however, as things stand now, I confess I shall be relieved when it is all over."

"I am sorry that it has put you under pressure," Edgar said in a low voice, "though you know I would have preferred a much smaller affair."

"And that is *not* your fault," his mother said significantly, just as the sound of Mrs. Mary Lloyd's shrill laugh drifted in from the lawn. For a moment they were silent, and then she added, "But I did not call you here to scold you. I wish to give you something. Sarah?"

A starched parlormaid appeared at the door of the drawing room carrying a box and bowed as she handed it to her mistress. Lady Charlotte carefully opened it, lifted out the length of white silk, and held it up to the light.

"Grandmother's veil," Edgar exclaimed. "Oh, Mother ..."

"I must admit, I was reluctant to part with it at first." Lady Charlotte folded it again, replacing it in the box, and looked up at her son. "You know, of course, that your father and I had never met before our wedding day. It was an arranged marriage, and the very

first time he saw my face was when he lifted that veil after the ceremony was over. It is one of my happiest memories.”

Her son was silent. Finding it necessary to conceal her face, as she was a little overcome, Lady Charlotte closed the box as her eyes lowered to the floor. “But perhaps Bella might find it a little out of date; I know it is not as fashionable for brides to wear veils these days.”

“Mother.” Lord Edgar Payton reached out and put a hand over hers. When she met his gaze, it was to find that his eyes were shining with tears, too. “I’m sure she will love it. Thank you.”

Outside on the lawn, Jane discreetly wiped her brow with a handkerchief, cast a glance up at the glaring sun, and forced herself to attend to what the housekeeper was saying. “Yes; yes, Mrs. White, I quite understand. I’m sure the guests will not be expecting more than one glass of wine apiece.”

“But we may not have ordered enough wine for all that, miss,” the housekeeper said in some distress. “I have not checked the cellar in a while, of course, and Mr. Harrow is so busy ...”

“You need not trouble the butler about this,” Jane said, with a reassuring smile. “I’m sure he has plenty on his mind, and heaven knows there are more than a few idle hands about to help.” Raising her voice, she called out, “Hubert? Hubert!”

The groomsman, who was at that point strolling across the lawn a little distance away from the marquee, turned, shading his eyes from the sun, and then smiled. With a bow, Mrs. White excused herself, and Jane lost in no time in informing him of their difficulty. “If it would not be an inconvenience to you, would you mind going down to the wine cellar to count how many bottles are in store?”

“It would be my pleasure,” said Hubert, very sincerely, and without further delay he betook himself across the lawn with great purpose. He bowed once as he passed the reclining figures of Mrs. Mary and Miss Bella Lloyd, increasing his pace as they looked ready to call him over, and stepped with some gratitude into the dark cool of the house.

The wine cellar was situated directly below the library, and so it

was necessary to pass through that room first to access it. Hubert had his hands on the smooth oak doors when, hearing female voices within, he stopped short.

"I can't bear to see her like this." He discerned the trembling tones of his sister, Kitty. "She won't rest for a moment; always saying that there is something to do."

The voice that spoke next was that of Sophia. "We can't blame her for wanting to occupy herself. When I think of all she must be suffering ..."

"We must *do* something. We can't just stand back and allow this to happen!"

"I told you what she said, Maria." Sophia sounded weary. "She told me not to interfere anymore."

"She doesn't know what's good for her," scoffed the younger Miss Ellison. "She can't *want* him to marry Bella and not her."

"But what can *we* do?" That was Kitty again.

"Absolutely nothing," Hubert declared as he pushed the doors open and stepped into the library, ignoring the scandalized gasps of the three ladies assembled at the long table there. "So, I would advise you to give up your complaining and get on with things like the rest of us."

"You know it is common courtesy to knock before entering a room, Hubert," Sophia said peevishly.

"Common courtesy or not, I feel it is my duty to warn you against whatever you might be planning." Shaking a finger, he went on, "Now, Edgar is to be married in two days, and he is to be married to Bella, whether you all like it or not."

"We *don't* like it," Sophia retorted.

Hubert sighed, as he shut the library door behind him and leaned his back against it. "I know it's a pity: anyone with two eyes in their head can see what Bella Lloyd and her mother are after. But ..."

"They're not going to get away with it," Maria said fiercely. "We're going to do something."

"What, exactly?" Hubert said, with a patient smile. As the others exchanged glances and remained resolutely silent, he continued, "If you will accept some counsel from one who knows the groom better than any of you, you should steer clear of any deception or trickery. There is nothing that Edgar Payton despises so much as dishonesty, and that I can tell you for a fact."

"Thank you for your enlightening comments," said Sophia sarcastically, "but I believe we shall get along better without your interference."

"My interference? Is that so?" Laughing, Hubert turned to the door. "Then, allow me to just go and inform Edgar of the diabolical scheme that is being hatched against him ..."

"Wait!" the ladies chorused together, and as he turned back, eyebrows raised, Maria said reluctantly, "We could use another ally. If you're willing."

"As far as my honor will allow me." Hubert chose to ignore the scoffing noise that Sophia made at this. "And I might just have an idea of where we can start."

* * *

After his conference with his mother, Edgar Payton felt a stirring desire to see his bride-to-be, and accordingly he ventured out onto the lawn. The heat of midday could well be felt by this time, and he had sprung up a sweat after a few paces down the lawn. He was surprised, however, when he came upon Bella alone with her mother. They were seated on a couple of lounge chairs that had been placed in the shade of the marquee, fanning themselves.

"Where is your sister?" he asked, and, at the blank look which ensued from this question, repeated, "Where is Jane?"

It was Mrs. Lloyd who answered. "Oh! She went down the drive with the gardener to do some measurements, I think."

"Measurements!" Edgar repeated. "Is she walking, in this heat?"

"I declare, I did try to stop her, but she would go," Mrs. Lloyd said

languidly, and Bella corroborated the testimony with a huge yawn. In an instant Edgar was walking away from them, toward the path that led down to the front drive of Thurrock. They called after him, but their voices soon died away. The sharp smell of the freshly-cut grass came to him as he walked, and its intensity combined with the buzzing of insects in the hedgerows on either side of the path, and the strength of the sun, soon contrived to make him feel quite dizzy.

The confusion was replaced by another, more potent emotion as he rounded a bend in the path and saw up ahead the gate that led to the orchards, and a white-clad figure drooping over it. The gardener stood a little distance away, wringing his hands, and he looked immensely relieved at the sight of his master.

“What happened, Phillips?” Edgar demanded as he came up to them at a quick stride.

“She was fine one minute, sir, and then the next she said she was feeling a little strange, so I said per’aps she ought to sit down for a minute ...” The gardener indicated the bench nearby, “... but she didn’t get that far.”

“What were you thinking, bringing her out in this heat?” Now Edgar had reached Jane, whose hands were braced on the gate before her, but he still addressed the gardener. Her breathing was heavy, her hair hung about her face in dark strands, and she was flushed.

“Please don’t punish him,” she said weakly, without lifting her head. “I insisted.”

“Of course,” Edgar said tightly, and then, with a nod to the gardener, he put an arm around Jane’s waist. More gently, “Can you walk?”

“I think so.” They had not gone more than a few steps, however, when she swayed and seemed on the point of falling again. With a sharp intake of breath, Edgar caught her, and lifted her into his arms.

“Do you need help, sir?”

“I’ll manage, Phillips. You go ahead and alert the housekeeper.” Edgar heaved another breath, adjusting his grip on Jane.

"I don't want ... any fuss." Turning, he looked down at Jane's face. Her grey eyes were open and focused on him.

"You're always like this," Edgar said, half-tenderly, half-angrily. "Since we were children: you never know when to stop. You must remember that you're not strong, Jane."

"I wanted to help," she said faintly.

"You always help." With a sigh, Edgar supported her shoulders a little more, raising her. "Here, put your head against my shoulder if you're feeling dizzy. That's it."

They were nearly back at the house now. Lord Edgar Payton looked at the figures rushing down the grass to meet him and Jane; he heard their cries rising into the hot summer air and saw behind them the white grandeur of the marquee, fluttering in the breeze. For a moment he had a sense of unreality: it could not be that the wedding was taking place in two days, and without his father there to celebrate with them.

But so it was, and as Jane was taken inside the house by her friends and put to bed, as Bella fell upon him with glowing looks of gratitude and sweet caresses, and as the sun began to sink in the sky once more, it all became real again for Edgar. And he did not know how, except in the possession of a moment's madness, he could have been less than overjoyed in the contemplation of it.

The Bride-to-be

Bella Lloyd detested outings of any kind that did not involve the lightening of someone's purse, and accordingly, when Edgar Payton sent her a note the day before the wedding asking that she accompany him on horseback to see his grandmother's old cottage, she had an excuse ready.

"As I am such a lover of nature, I really am sorry to miss it," she read aloud as she sat at the writing desk in Lady Charlotte Payton's drawing room, *"But I could not with conscience leave my sister when she is in such a state of ill health."* Turning to look over the back of her chair, "What do you think? Will Edgar believe it?"

The only others in the room with her were Jane and her friend Sophia, and so, in the absence of the mother of the groom, Bella was considerably freer with her expressions. Jane was predictably uncooperative, however, merely looking up from her book once to say, "You know that I am perfectly well now, Bella, and I don't like to be brought into any untruth of yours."

Bella made a face as she rose from her chair. "Well, be that as it may, I'm going to send it. Where's that servant?"

As the youngest Lloyd sister made for the door, Sophia Ellison spoke for the first time. "I really think you might want to reconsider."

Bella stopped, and slowly turned about, curiosity written all over her face. "Why?"

"Edgar said that he wishes you to see his grandmother's cottage," Sophia said evenly, as she drew a needle through the handkerchief she was embroidering. "Don't you think there might be something in that?"

Now both Lloyd sisters were staring at her, confused. Sophia patiently explained, "His grandmother. Don't you remember what

she was famous for?"

Bella's eyes rose to the portrait that hung above the piano, rested for a moment on the formidable old woman depicted in it, and then widened considerably. "The Payton pearls! She always wore them! Oh, *Sophia!*" In an instant she had crossed the room, squealing, and thrown her arms around the other young lady, causing her to drop her needle. "He wants to give them to me before the wedding! Oh, how *delicious!*"

"There is a chance that I might be wrong," Sophia said calmly. She met Jane's inquiring gaze over her sister's shoulder and shrugged.

"I must go! Of course, I must go! I won't bother with a note. I'll tell him right away!" Bella was up again and crumpling the note on her desk, unlacing the apron over her morning dress. She clasped her hands together over her breast and looked again at the portrait of old Lady Payton. "Oh, I didn't think it was possible to be this *happy!*"

"You will want companions on your outing," Sophia continued, setting aside her ruined work. "To witness your happiness."

"Yes; yes of course! We must *all* go!"

A little over an hour later, the horses had been brought around from the stables and saddled. Bella Lloyd came down the steps in her riding habit, barely able to contain her excitement, and Edgar, with his gaze fixed admiringly on her, thought she had never looked so radiant.

"I don't know what kind of trick you might have in mind," Jane said in a low voice to Sophia as they followed Bella down the steps. "But remember what I said about interfering."

"What are you suspecting me of?" Her friend turned wondering eyes on her, and with a laugh, let go of her arm. "Don't worry, Jane. Have a nice quiet day without us."

"You know I am perfectly capable of coming with you," Jane said.

"In your state of ill health? We wouldn't dream of it."

"It feels awfully like you're all trying to get rid of me," Jane remarked with narrowed eyes to Hubert as he came past her to help

Sophia onto her horse. He gave the same laugh that her friend had and tapped his nose. After him came Kitty and Maria, both of whom refused to meet Jane's eye.

"Have a lovely time!" Lady Charlotte Payton called, waving, as the mounted party started down the driveway. She turned to Jane and squeezed her arm. "I know you're disappointed to miss the fun, my dear, but it is good to have friends who are so solicitous for your health."

Though a bright, sunny day, it was not so hot as the last had been, and a gentle breeze blew on the faces of their riders as they passed the gatehouse and came down into the fields. The path could not hold more than two abreast, and so Edgar and Bella took the lead, with the servant behind them, then Hubert and Sophia, with Kitty and Maria bringing up the rear.

"I think Jane suspects something," Hubert remarked to Sophia when they had gone a little way in silence.

"Of course, she does!" Sophia sighed, and brushed a red curl off her forehead. "But we couldn't have her with us; she would interfere."

"How do you think Bella will respond, when she sees the gift Edgar is really giving to her?" Hubert lowered his voice as he glanced towards the backs of the couple ahead of them.

"I think she will be so surprised," his companion said levelly, "that Edgar will see through her at long last." She looked at Hubert, who was smiling at her, and raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"I was thinking how fetching you look in your riding habit."

Sophia rolled her eyes and urged her horse on. "Find someone else to flatter, Hubert."

"My grandmother was very good to me when I was growing up," Edgar Payton said quietly, as he framed a hand against his eyes to shield from the sun. "I often came to Thurrock to stay with her. It made such a change from town; I never wanted to go back."

"Oh—indeed?" said Bella flatly. She had never been a good rider; now she was barely managing to keep her horse under control, a sturdy mare who seemed entirely immune to her riding whip. "It

sounds lovely. Do we have much further to go?”

“Not too far now.” Edgar cast a sidelong glance at his bride-to-be, and said affectionately, “Are you feeling tired?”

“No!” Bella said hastily. “I’m just impatient to see this cottage.” Inspiration struck after a moment, and she added, “This cottage that means so much to *you*.”

“You are very kind. You and Jane have both been such a comfort to me and my mother in this time, you know. We are lucky that your family chose to live in Brunswick Square.”

“Yes, well,” Bella said, a little crossly now. *Why did Jane have to come into everything?* “We are lucky too, I suppose.”

Smiling, Edgar turned in his saddle to look at her, and seemed on the point of saying something else when Hubert called out from behind them.

“I say, Payton, is that it?”

A thatched rooftop had appeared between trees ahead of them. Edgar smiled, and clicked his tongue over his horse to urge her ahead of the rest. Over his shoulder, he said to Bella and Hubert, “We shall go a little more slowly from here. The ground is not as good.”

They came to a copse of trees, in the center of which was a small cottage overgrown with ivy and honeysuckle. Bella thought she had never seen such an eyesore. As Edgar swung off his horse and offered a hand to her, she tried to think of something complimentary to say. “It’s ... very ...”

“It has fallen into disrepair since Grandmother passed away,” Edgar said, giving Bella his arm. “But I have been planning many improvements for it. Come, I’ll show you what I intend to do with the garden.” As they went, he cast a significant look over his shoulder at Hubert, who cleared his throat and turned to the others.

“Ah, perhaps we ought to give them a moment?”

“I don’t see how this is helping Jane,” Maria said in a low voice, as they watched the couple retreat to the cottage.

"I don't either," Kitty said tremulously. "What if the plan ..."

"It will work," Sophia said fiercely, folding her arms over her front. Hubert glanced at her, eyebrows raised. "Just wait."

"Grandmother loved spending time here, away from all the business of the estate," Edgar said as he led Bella through the small gate and into the garden. "Perhaps you might find it a haven of sorts, after we are married."

"Hmmm." Bella wrinkled her nose, looking around her. "What is that *noise*?"

"The buzzing?" Edgar glanced to the trees behind the house. "Grandmother used to keep bees."

"*Bees*?" his betrothed repeated, aghast.

"She loved nature. Of course, after she died, there was no one left to attend them, and the hives were destroyed by our gamekeeper. But it's still a favored spot, I suppose." Edgar reached out and took Bella's hands in his. "Dearest Bella." With a rueful laugh, "I'm still not used to calling you that. There was a reason I brought you out here."

Bella let go of one of his hands to swat at an imaginary bee. "Oh—really?"

"There is something I want to give you." He gave a signal to the servant standing by with the others, who bowed and came forward, clutching a box.

Eyes shining, Bella Lloyd gazed up at him. "Oh, Edgar ..."

"This belonged to my grandmother," Edgar said as he took the box. The manservant bowed and moved away again. "She wore it on her own wedding day. I know she would have liked you to do the same."

Smiling from ear to ear, Bella opened the box, and drew out a long, heavy veil. She stopped short. Her mouth opened and closed several times, without any sound coming out.

"Er—Bella?" Anxious, Edgar looked at her for her reaction. "Do you like it?"

“Like it?” Bella Lloyd repeated, astounded. Her eyes lifted to meet his, and her voice rose. “Do you really expect me to wear this—this THING?” A bird fluttered out of one of the trees above them.

“I ... thought it would become you,” Edgar said helplessly.

“I thought you were going to give me her pearls!”

“Her pearls?” Edgar frowned, confused. “But those are my mother’s now; I don’t think she would wish to part with them.”

“Is that so?” Her lips clamped together, Bella Lloyd swung around to look back at Sophia, who had a handkerchief pressed over her mouth as she shook with silent laughter. “Oh, I see now. It has all been one grand joke to you all, has it?”

“Bella, you’re not yourself,” Edgar said tenderly. “Let’s go back to the house and discuss this there. Of course, no one expects you to wear the veil if you don’t want to.”

“I’m not travelling back there with *them!*” Bella said emphatically, with one hand stretched out to indicate all of their companions. Lifting her chin, “I shall walk back to the house myself.”

“Bella—Bella, you’re going the wrong way!” Edgar exclaimed as she stalked away, shoving the gate open and making straight for the trees. Throwing up his hands, he looked to Hubert, who hastily arranged his features into a solemn expression. “Well—shouldn’t I go after her?”

“I would recommend it, my lord,” said the servant, who had paled considerably. “You see—our gamekeeper was unable to destroy *all* of the hives.”

Edgar gulped, and a moment later, they heard a ghastly shriek from the trees. Bella Lloyd came stumbling out again, her hands pressed over her face as a swarm of bees followed her. The sound of ferocious buzzing increased in ferocity the closer she came. Kitty and Maria shrieked and threw themselves behind Hubert, who stood transfixed: Sophia came forward with a heavy stick she had pulled from the undergrowth, and, with the help of Edgar and the valiant manservant, attempted to persuade the bees to move elsewhere. They were forced to abandon this plan before long and effect a retreat instead toward their horses, who themselves were

beginning to bolt.

In the midst of all this chaos, Edgar became aware that Bella was shouting something at him, and periodically tugging at his arm. When they had reached their steeds, he finally discerned the words as, “The veil! Give me the *veil!*” He hurriedly handed her the box, and with one hand still concealing her face, his bride-to-be tugged out the veil and fastened it to her hair. The servant helped them onto their saddles and brought up the rear himself, fending off attacks by the swarm with a mighty swipe of his horse’s whip, and in this way, they were conveyed back to the house.

* * *

“I knew it. I *knew* you were up to something.” Jane Lloyd crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows at Hubert Worthington and Sophia Ellison. Evening had set in; they were back in the drawing room of Thurrock, and the two co-conspirators, having told her the whole story of what had transpired by the cottage, were still seized by the occasional convulsion of laughter. “Now, what do you have to say for yourselves?”

“I am sorry ...” Sophia gasped, wiping a tear from her eye, “... that you were not there to see it.”

Jane’s mouth twitched, as though she were trying not to smile, and she swung around to the gentleman. “Hubert? What about you?”

“I can only say, dear Miss Lloyd ...” Hubert said, in a voice weak with laughter, “... that we would never have intended for any harm to come to your sister, and certainly never planned for anything as—well—perfect.”

Jane turned away, one hand on the back of the piano where she had been practicing when they came upon her. “Bella hates bees. She always gets into such a tizzy when they are around her: I’m sure it didn’t help matters when they—er—attacked.” As Sophia giggled, she turned and gave her friend another disapproving frown. “You may laugh all you like, but I can tell you that you would *not* be laughing if you had seen Bella’s face. It’s so swollen, and with the wedding tomorrow, she won’t want anyone looking at

her: least of all Edgar.”

“Don’t they always say love is blind?” Hubert said gravely, before he and Sophia fell to laughing again. Shaking her head, Jane moved for the door.

“I should get dressed for dinner.” She halted as the door opened, and the others fell silent as Edgar came in. He looked pale but resolute.

“Jane? Might I have a word?”

“I ...”

“I wish to ask you about something.” Edgar glanced at Hubert and Sophia before leading Jane out of the drawing room.

“So?” Sophia said, once they were alone together. “Did you get the laudanum yet?”

Hubert looked at her doubtfully. “Kitty went downstairs to talk to the cook. She should have a bottle of it somewhere. But, Sophia, I must say, I’m not sure ...”

“None of us planned for what happened today, but as it turns out it is our perfect opportunity: it is Jane’s perfect opportunity.”

“Which she knows nothing about,” Hubert pointed out, rubbing his clean-shaven chin.

Sophia inclined her head. “That is the way it must be, until tomorrow.”

“So, you are going to go ahead with it,” Hubert said quietly.

“Not without your help.” Sophia’s face was utterly serious now, as she looked at him. “I know you’re Edgar’s friend. But you must know that this is what is best for him. He simply cannot marry Bella. You saw her today, when he gave her the veil.”

“I did ...”

“Then we’re agreed.” Sophia turned away from him. “Let’s meet again after dinner.”

Outside, Lord Edgar Payton led his childhood friend down a path that wound parallel to the kitchen gardens. The light of day was fading now, and long shadows stretched out on the paving stones ahead of them.

"I hope you're recovered after yesterday?" Edgar asked Jane.

"Quite recovered. I must apologize again for giving you and your mother unnecessary worry. It was very foolish of me to venture out in such heat."

"No apology is necessary. You were doing what you do best: helping others." Edgar gave her one of his old, familiar smiles. "But you must remember to look after yourself, too, Jane. You have many friends who care for you, and who wish to see you happy and healthy. It is important that you remember that."

Jane returned his smile. "I shall try." As she was saying so, the shawl she had brought with her began to slip down her back, and Edgar reached out to adjust it. His hand rested for a moment on the space between her shoulder blades and lingered there, until she turned. Her clear grey eyes met his, and in another instant, Edgar was ashamed. He dropped his hand.

They had passed into the shade of one of his father's orchards now, and Jane moved a little ahead of him on the path, turning her head this way and that to look up at the old trees. Her hand trailed along the trunk of one, traced the higher branches of another, and she seemed to have strayed into a happy reverie when Edgar found it necessary to speak again. "I need your advice on something, Jane. I must ask ..."

Halting with her back to him, Jane squeezed her eyes shut, praying. *Please, please...*

"... what you think I should do about the wedding."

There was a pause. Jane opened her eyes again but did not turn. "I don't know what you mean."

Edgar cleared his throat. "Then allow me to make it clearer. I have been battling with myself, wondering if perhaps ... Bella and I

might have been a little hasty.”

Jane was silent. She did not trust herself to respond.

“Your sister is so very charming,” Edgar went on, “and I am so very fond of her, but of late, I have found myself wondering if she returns my feelings. What I saw of her behavior today makes me fear that she does not.” He paused, uncertain. “And yet ... she is so very warm, so open in her heart, that I am sure she could not deceive anyone if she tried.”

Discreetly, Jane put out a hand to the tree-trunk beside her for support. She shook her head, still unable to speak.

“I am sorry if my questions put you in an uncomfortable position,” Edgar’s very voice, so anxious, so solicitous, was painful to her ears. “I only wish to know if, perhaps, it might be better to postpone the wedding for a little while, in order to improve our acquaintance. Perhaps it would be setting Bella free; perhaps ...” He swallowed, “... she would meet other young men whom she might prefer.”

Jane Lloyd watched the leaf shadows darting on the path: so small and delicate. She did not speak for a long time. Neither did Edgar, and yet she knew that he had not moved from his position; he still stood behind her, eager, waiting.

“I cannot answer as to my sister’s feelings,” Jane said at last. She drew in a deep breath. “But I do not think it right that you should judge her by today. I understand—from what the others tell me—that she was under some stress.”

“I have never seen her like that before,” said Edgar, his voice low.

“We none of us are perfect. And as you said yourself, you and Bella still have much to learn about one another. But while I cannot presume to advise you on any course of action ...” Jane closed her eyes again, and tightened her grip on the tree-trunk, as she uttered the words that would administer the final, fatal blow to her heart. “... I can assure you that Bella considers you superior to any other young man of her acquaintance. She has eyes for no other.”

Lord Edgar Payton exhaled heavily, as though he had been holding his breath for a long time. He pressed forward, taking Jane’s hand in his even as she remained still, her face turned away. “Thank you,

Jane. *Thank* you. You have put my mind at ease. We shall go ahead with the wedding as planned.”

* * *

“We shall *not* go ahead with the wedding,” declared Bella Lloyd for everyone to hear, as she sat by the vanity table in her dressing room. She had refused to dress for dinner, turned away Lady Charlotte’s maid, and ordered her female companions to bolt the door and drape all of the mirrors in the vicinity with whatever material they could find. “I will *not* be paraded before the ladies of Brunswick Square for them to point and laugh at me. Miss Maria, are you writing all of this down?”

“Yes,” said Maria Ellison, who had stationed herself at the other end of the room with a pen and paper, “except, I am trying to put it in more gentle terms.”

“Never mind that,” growled Bella, and then to Sophia, who was brushing her hair, “What are *you* looking at? Carry on. Now, Maria, I want to make it very clear to Edgar that I am not going to leave this room until my face has fully healed. Let Mother and Lady Charlotte think that I am sick; no one else must hear about what happened today. Whatever preparations might have been made, they must be postponed again until I am ready. Is that understood?”

“Of course, Miss Bella,” said Maria quickly.

“You could always wear Edgar’s grandmother’s veil,” Sophia then slyly suggested, at which her sister actually let out a laugh that she rapidly turned into a cough.

Bella turned in her chair and fixed her eyes on Sophia. The fury in them, combined with the violent red swelling of her face, made her look positively demonic. In a low, dangerous voice, “I am *not* wearing that thing.”

“But it would cover the stings ...”

Bella rose from her chair and appeared to be on the point of throttling Sophia when there came a knock on the door. She froze. “Who is it?”

The answer came. "Only Kitty." Bella sighed in relief, and gestured to Maria to let the girl in.

"I brought tea," said Kitty, indicating the tray she was carrying. She met Sophia's inquiring gaze and nodded, once.

"Nothing to eat?" Bella said in dismay, and then, reaching over, took a cup off its saucer. "Well, never mind." She raised it to her lips and drained it. "Kitty, take that note to Edgar's chambers. Don't let him come to visit; tell him I don't wish to see anyone." She put down her cup on the table with a rattle and wiped the corners of her mouth with her handkerchief.

"Yes, Bella," said Kitty meekly, as she took the folded note from Maria, and tiptoed out of the dressing room.

Hubert caught up with his sister at the top of the grand staircase. "Have you given her the laudanum?"

"Yes, the housekeeper made such a fuss at first, saying she didn't have any, but when I told her it was for Bella Lloyd she said, 'Poor girl!' and got it for me right away."

"I'm sure today's bee incident is the talk of downstairs," her brother said, with a wry smile. "Give me the bottle, will you, just in case she wakes up on the journey."

Kitty obeyed, and Hubert seized hold of her elbow, steering her back toward the dressing room. "Stay with her until she's fallen asleep," he ordered. "Then send for me. The carriage is being readied downstairs—we've paid a few of the servants off, but we'll need to be quick about it all the same. Make sure you—" He stopped dead, sniffing the bottle in his hand. "Wait a minute: this isn't laudanum, it's gin!"

"Well, how was I to know?" Kitty said fearfully. "Cook told me it was laudanum!"

Tentatively, they opened the door of the dressing room, to find Maria and Sophia attempting to hush Bella as she giggled uncontrollably. "Hubert!" she exclaimed in delight, throwing out her hands as she saw him and knocking a bottle of perfume off her vanity table.

"How much did she drink?" Hubert demanded of the two sisters. They exchanged a glance.

"Her own cup, and Kitty's too."

"But surely you only put the stuff in one cup?" He swung around to look at Kitty, who bit her lip.

"I ... wasn't sure I'd remember which one."

Bella was still staring at Hubert, as she struggled up from her chair. "He's so handsome!" she said in a loud whisper to Sophia and Maria. "Much more handsome than Edgar!"

The girls giggled. "This isn't funny," Hubert exclaimed, putting his hands on his hips. "How are we supposed to get her downstairs in this state? How—oh." He staggered backwards as Bella took a few lurching steps towards him and then threw her arms around his neck. "Oh dear."

"It looks to me, Hubert," Sophia observed measuredly, while Maria snorted with laughter, "like Bella Lloyd will go with you very willingly."

"Not funny," Hubert repeated, as he attempted to detach Bella's hands from his neck. With an air of resignation as she resisted him, "Oh come on, then, all of you. We've no time to lose."

Every step through the quiet house was agonizing. Sophia took the lead, with her sister and Kitty a little way behind, and Hubert bringing up the rear as he kept a firm hold on Bella's hand. All of them held their breath as they passed the corridor that led to the west wing, where Edgar and his mother's chambers were—all except for Bella, who did not stop giggling all the way—but no one came forth to confront them.

Only when they had reached the bottom of the servants' staircase did Sophia signal to them to stop. They pressed themselves into the little corner and waited in the darkness as the butler came whistling past the door, which stood ajar. He paused for a moment by the gap, his keys jangling, and then continued on his way. A moment later they heard a door close. "*Now!*" Hubert whispered.

Through the kitchen and down the steps into the back garden they

stumbled. The carriage was waiting around the side of the house, and Bella exclaimed so loudly as they approached it that for a moment, Sophia was sure they would wake the family. But at a whisper from Hubert, she became very meek, and smiling broadly, allowed herself to be handed into the carriage. Kitty was next. The gentleman went last, hanging back a moment to address Sophia.

"We'll be back by morning. Will you be all right?"

"Fine," Sophia said hastily, with an anxious glance back at the lighted windows of the house behind them. "Go, go." The door closed, and she bundled the others back inside as the carriage rolled away into the night.

A knock at the door of Lord Edgar Payton roused him from his doze, and he rose to take the note from the servant, opening it as he came inside his room.

Dearest Edgar,

Let's continue with the wedding as planned. I shall wear your grandmother's veil, and no one will be any the wiser.

Yours,

Bella Lloyd

In Sickness and In Health

Mrs. Mary Lloyd was never one for rising early, but this was one morning when she was happy to break with tradition and thoroughly dedicate herself to getting in the way of all of the servants preparing the marquee. For Bella, it was a sacrifice she was willing to make.

However, where there was a task to be done, or a quarrel to be smoothed over, Mrs. Lloyd was accustomed to her other daughter being close at hand, and she was therefore surprised, as the sun rose in the sky, and carriages began to roll up the drive to Thurrock, when Jane made no appearance.

"Where can she be?" she exclaimed to Lady Charlotte, as the two ladies stood outside the marquee. "On the day of her sister's wedding, no less! I declare I cannot believe it."

"Do let her rest a little while longer; she has been such a help these last few days." But the pleas of Edgar's mother went unheard, as Mrs. Lloyd now found it expedient to seek out her daughter herself and remind her of her duty.

"Where is Jane? Where is my daughter?" she demanded of various servants running up and down the hallways. Most met her with apologies and blank faces, but one footman whom she stopped outside the breakfast room made a grimace.

"I b'lieve Miss Lloyd was badly stung by bees yesterday, madam."

"Bees?" Mrs. Lloyd repeated, astounded.

"Yes, madam." The footman bowed, and went on his way. Mrs. Lloyd stayed where she was, her mouth working silently, and then, with an air of bustling decision, she went on her way once more.

There was no reply when she knocked on the door of her eldest daughter's chamber. "Jane, dear?" she called warily through the

wood. "I have heard about your little accident, but I am sure your face cannot be so very bad. Do come down."

Silence. Mrs. Lloyd sighed. "Now Jane, I think you are being quite silly. You know I have always told you girls not to be too vain about your looks. No one will compare you to Bella, if that is what you're afraid of. You can even stand at the back behind the Ellisons and no one will look at you twice."

While Mrs. Mary Lloyd continued to conduct an entirely one-sided conversation, attempting various different modes of persuasion, Jane Lloyd was actually sitting in her sister's dressing room, staring at her friends as they fell upon her armed with hairbrushes and perfume.

"I'm sure this isn't necessary," she said more than once, when Sophia seized up her small hand and began to paint her nails. "I am only the bridesmaid—and for that matter, where is Bella? Is she up yet?"

A knock came on the dressing-room door at around ten o'clock, and Sophia, with a glance at the clock on the dresser, left Maria to take over and rushed to the door. Hubert was outside, already clad in his coattails and a crisp, starched shirt. His sister, already dressed, was by his side, and after a hasty greeting to Sophia, rushed inside to attend to Jane.

"You're back," Sophia said to Hubert, and then, with a glance at one of the maids who was standing within earshot, tugged him a little down the hall. "How is she?"

"Sleeping off the gin, in the good hands of my housekeeper," Hubert replied, and then, rubbing a hand along his jaw, he appeared to grow a little more uncomfortable. "She does not seem to recall ... anything of her behavior last night."

"All the better for her. But I must congratulate you on your conquest." Sophia's eyes laughed at him, and Hubert shook his head.

"It's not too late to call everything off, you know."

"We can't give up when we've come this far!" she scolded. Lowering her voice, "Now, I've been wondering what we can do about Edgar."

His eyesight is not very good, is that true?"

"He wears eyeglasses for reading, and in dim light. No doubt he'll bring them along today, for the church." Struck as though by a wave of inspiration, Hubert exclaimed, "I can hide them!"

"Good," Sophia said. "Then we just have to—" She stopped short and pushed him aside unceremoniously, running back up the corridor. Offended, Hubert turned and then gulped, for striding purposefully toward them was Edgar's mother.

"Lady Charlotte!" Sophia exclaimed loudly, hoping that those within the dressing room would hear her. "Did you sleep well?"

A little disconcerted by her volume, the lady nodded. She was carrying a small box in her hand. "Yes, thank you, Miss Ellison. I was just coming to see Bella. Is she inside?" Without waiting for their reply, she reached the door of the dressing room and began to turn the handle; Sophia leapt forward and threw her arms out.

"No, you can't!"

"I beg your pardon?" Lady Charlotte Payton demanded.

"What Miss Ellison means to say," Hubert caught up with the ladies, panting, and put a hand on the arm of his friend's mother, "is that you cannot see the bride because it would be—bad luck."

"Bad luck—yes," said Sophia, with a grateful look at him.

"I thought it was only bad luck for the *groom* to see the bride," said Lady Charlotte, frowning.

"Yes, well, you can't be too careful, can you?" Hubert said hastily.

"I can take that to Bella," Sophia offered, thrusting out a hand to take the box.

"But I did want to have a conversation with her," Lady Charlotte said regretfully, with a glance at the door of the dressing room. "Surely if I just stepped in for a moment ..."

"It would be of no use, madam, I assure you," Sophia said firmly, shaking her head. "Bella is so superstitious, she will not speak to you even if you try."

“Oh. Well, in that case ...”

“Come along, and let us see if the groom requires anything,” Hubert said hastily, as he took the arm of Edgar’s mother and steered her back down the corridor. He cast a panicked glance back at Sophia, who gave him a reassuring smile.

“What’s all this nonsense about bees?” Turning, Sophia found herself assailed from the other direction by Mrs. Lloyd, who was bustling down the corridor toward her. “Really, I told Jane that it cannot be so bad as all that, but she will not come out of her room! I declare, I never knew a girl to be so vain about her appearance, and on her sister’s happy day, too!”

Baffled beyond words, Sophia found that this time, she was too late in blocking entrance to the dressing room: Mrs. Mary Lloyd pushed her way in, only to stop short as she was faced with Maria Ellison and Kitty Worthington, standing shoulder to shoulder. “What’s this? Where is Bella?”

“She is not here,” said the terrified Kitty, and then, the more collected voice of Maria broke in.

“She does not wish to see anyone.”

Mrs. Lloyd, craning her neck to see over their heads, seemed determined to contradict them on both points when, all at once, Maria Ellison burst into tears. “Oh sad, sad day!”

“Whatever’s the matter?” More alarmed than concerned, Mrs. Lloyd stared as the younger Ellison sister launched herself at her.

“I wish *I* were getting married today and not her!” With a theatrical wail, “It’s not fair, that Bella should get there first out of all of us!”

“There, there,” Mrs. Lloyd said uncertainly, patting the girl’s back. “Now, do calm yourself; I am sure there are plenty of fine young men out there, and I know that you would not begrudge dear Bella’s happiness ...” But Maria’s sobs only grew the louder. In an exaggerated whisper, Sophia leaned toward the matriarch.

“Perhaps it would be best if you brought her for a little walk, to calm her down.”

“Yes, well—all right.’ A little uncertain, Mrs. Lloyd brought Maria

out with her. "Come along, dear. Now, you must calm yourself. Bella, dear! I will be back soon."

Alone again, Sophia's eyes widened as Kitty stepped aside, and into view came her friend, whom she barely recognized: Jane Lloyd stood by the mirror at the dressing table, her hands clasped in front of her. She wore white silk gloves and a white silk band in her hair, which had been pinned back in a shining knot but for a few black tendrils that framed her face. The gown she wore was naturally elaborate, having been of Bella's choosing, and Sophia only spared a glance for its white organdie frills and foamy lace. What drew her eye was the deep pink blush that had spread through Jane's cheeks. In that moment, no one could have accused her of want of color, or of any appearance of ill health.

"You are beautiful, Jane," Sophia breathed. Then, with a glance at the veil hanging over the wardrobe, "What a pity he will not see it."

Tears sprung up into Jane's eyes, and her voice shook as she said, "I told you not to interfere."

"Will you leave us for a moment?" Sophia asked the other two, who bowed their heads and fled the room. Turning back to Jane, "I didn't listen." She took a quick step forward and seized her friend's gloved hands up in her own. "Be as angry at me as you will—hate me if you like! Only, *please*, Jane, take this day of happiness for your own. It is yours. You deserve it."

The tears were running down Jane's cheeks now. Tenderly, her friend took out her handkerchief and pressed them away. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to. I can go downstairs and tell them that the bride has been taken ill. We will take you away; we will make sure no one asks any questions. But Jane ..." Sophia paused, and drew in a deep breath. "You love Edgar, and you want to be with him, don't you?"

Silent, Jane nodded, and nodded again.

"Then this is your chance. You *know* Bella isn't right for him. Jane ..." Sophia Ellison dropped her friend's hands, folded away the handkerchief, and stepped back. "He is waiting for you."

Across the house, in the west wing, Lord Edgar Payton stepped behind the screen in his chamber and gave a nervous laugh. "I don't know what it is, Hubert, but I feel like I have forgotten something: I feel just as if I'm in school again, and the master is about to reprimand me for not studying my Latin verbs."

"I never bothered with Latin verbs," Hubert Worthington said lazily, and then, with a sly glance at the screen, stepped toward the chair over which Edgar had slung his coat. In one of the pockets poked out a pair of eyeglasses. The groomsman stretched out a hand ...

"Do *you* think I'm making the right decision?" Edgar came out from behind the screen, his shirt half-on, half-off. Hubert snatched back his hand.

"I think it's a very handsome shirt."

"I don't mean about the shirt, you dunderhead. I mean about the wedding. Should I have put it off? Perhaps we're not ready. Perhaps Bella would have preferred to wait ..."

"Put this on and stop blathering." Hubert tossed a cravat at his friend. "At this rate, we'll be later to arrive than the bride, and that, my friend, is never a good omen."

"You shouldn't have sent Robinson away," Edgar said sulkily, as he retreated behind the screen once more.

"You don't need your valet," Hubert said, rolling his eyes. "You have me." Quick as a flash, he drew back his hand for the second time as his friend's head appeared around the screen again.

"What do you think of her? Of Bella?"

"Really, Edgar, now is hardly the time—" But at his friend's look of appeal, Hubert gave up. Casting his mind back to what little acquaintance he had with Bella—most of it having occurred the evening before—he said hesitantly, "She is ... er, certainly very beautiful. And very affectionate."

"Affectionate? Yes, I suppose she is." Edgar emerged from behind the screen with his shirt fully buttoned and laughed as he turned

down the cuffs. "I'm sorry, Hubert. You must think me a great fool."

"Not a *great* fool," Hubert said, stepping forward to help. His friend laughed as he expertly tied his cravat.

"You've always been good for me, Hubert. It's a lucky thing I've kept you around."

Hubert Worthington shut his eyes for a moment. He had felt pangs of conscience over the past few days, as every step of his and the girls' plan advanced further, but none so great as now. "It is you who have been good for me," he said at last, gravely. "If not for you, I might still be drinking wine in Oxford and wasting my life away at card tables. Edgar, I want you to know—"

"Who's blathering now?" Edgar clapped his friend on the shoulder, laughing. "Come on, help me on with my coat."

Grinning, Hubert lifted the coat off the chair, shook it out, and, in one smooth movement, plucked the eyeglasses out with one hand and slipped his friend's right arm into the corresponding sleeve with the other. "There we are," he said, as Edgar stepped forward and turned to face him. "I suppose it's time."

A crowd had gathered in the main foyer of Thurrock Hall. Ladies patted their fussy coiffures in place as a breeze came sweeping in from the open doors behind, and their gentlemen companions discreetly checked their pocket watches. Lord Edgar Payton stood a little apart from them all, at the foot of the grand staircase, with Hubert at his side. Neither turned around as a collective gasp went around the room.

Only when his veiled bride had reached his side did Edgar risk a glance down at her. He could not make out her expression as he held out his arm, and he wondered to himself if her heart was racing like his. After a moment's hesitation that was so brief it was almost imperceptible to the watching crowd, she took it. They walked together to the doors, the crowd parting before them with admiring murmurs, and the bridesmaids falling into place behind.

When they had come out into the morning sun, Edgar felt his bride trembling, and he turned, putting his gloved hand over hers. "Don't be afraid," he whispered. She bowed her head, but after a moment,

he felt her fingers give his an answering squeeze, and a smile broke across his face.

The ceremony was as beautiful as any of the parties concerned could have hoped. There were many who sighed in relief as the minister joined the hands of the couple, and Lady Charlotte Payton was not ashamed to count herself among them; all morning she had been so anxious that something might go wrong that she had not had time to indulge in happy tears. Mrs. Mary Lloyd, for her part, had soaked three handkerchiefs in the past hour, and seemed liable to continue doing so, as everything seemed to provoke her feelings: the wonderful weather, the number of guests assembled, the radiant beauty of her little Bella.

Of course, it was odd that her daughter refused to take off that gaudy veil, even as the evening drew on and the dinner was served up in the marquee; *that* circumstance gave her a moment's pause, and she had some difficulty in explaining it away to her friends. But at the very least, it seemed to please Lady Charlotte Payton, and Edgar had not stopped beaming since the ceremony.

Many well-wishers had come and gone to the high table by the time the candles had been lit, and the bridesmaids stayed by the side of the new Lady Payton throughout it all. They always seemed to be close at hand, as did Edgar's groomsman, who was continually draining his own glass of wine, filling it up again and pushing it toward his friend. This was remarked by more than a few onlookers, and great was their curiosity, but greater still their disappointment at being unable to look upon the bride's face. The beauty of Miss Bella Lloyd was a byword among those acquainted with her groom, and many of his tenants and neighbors in Thurrock had been looking forward to witnessing it for themselves.

"She is so very pious, you see," Sophia was explaining for the fifth time to someone's great-aunt after the cake had been cut, when the mother of the groom approached their seat, "that she really cannot take it off. Ah! Lady Charlotte."

"I wanted to congratulate you again," the Dowager Duchess said warmly, sitting in the vacant seat to the bride's right. "It has been such a happy day." Her eyes drifted past the two girls to the end of the table. "But where is Jane? I'm sure I have not seen her all day."

Sophia caught hold of the bride's fork, which had nearly dropped to the floor with the involuntary start she had given, and winced at Lady Payton. "I am afraid Jane was taken ill again this morning."

"I thought she was stung by bees!" Mrs. Lloyd said, popping up on the other side of Lady Charlotte.

Edgar chose this moment to join the conversation, screwing up his face in confusion as he turned to the ladies. "It wasn't *Jane* who was stung by bees, it was ..."

"More wine," Hubert said hastily, throwing an arm over his companion's shoulders as he nodded to a weary-looking servant, who came up and obligingly filled Edgar's cup again. "Drink, my friend. Everyone drink, to the bride and groom!"

"To the bride and groom," everyone echoed, and in the momentary distraction, Sophia rose from her seat and came forward to hiss in Hubert's ear, "You have to get them out of here!"

"I know," he muttered back, and then, more loudly to Edgar, who was blinking in a bleary fashion and patting the pocket of his coat. "What's that, my friend? Are you quite well?"

"I'm sure I put my glasses in here this morning," Edgar said. "Did you see them?"

"Your glasses? Why don't we go up the room and look for them?" Hubert maneuvered his friend into a standing position, and ignoring his protests, began to steer him down the high table. Edgar stumbled a little.

"I can't see ..."

"It's all right, hold onto me," Hubert muttered, and then, with an easy smile to Mr. Lloyd, who had risen from his chair with a look of alarm, "Too much wine, you know."

Back at the table, Lady Charlotte Payton was still lingering beside her son's new bride. "I see that you are not wearing those pearls, Bella," she said, with some hesitation. "I hope they were to your liking. I meant to give them to you personally this morning, but I was—er—detained." She glanced a little uneasily at Sophia, who smiled brightly as though she had not understood her.

"She loved them! In fact," squeezing the bride's arm, "She loved them so much that she is going to go and put them on right now. Come on, Jane! I mean—er—Bella." Sophia went bright red as she tugged her friend to her feet and ushered her out of the marquee.

Night had fully fallen outside, and a carpet of stars twinkled in the sky. Edgar Payton crossed his chamber unsteadily, and then sighed. "It's no use, my glasses aren't here. Let's go back—Hubert?" He turned to the open door of his chamber, and saw, instead of his friend standing there, the figure of his bride. "Oh."

Sophia and Hubert tripped down the stairs together. "We've done all we can now," she said to him. "Now let's enjoy the rest of the party."

Giddy with their success, they did not even notice the father of the bride standing by the French doors of the conservatory, passing right by him into the night.

As has been stated before, Mr. Samuel Lloyd was not the most perceptive of men. But even he had felt something in the course of the day, which had struck him as not quite right. Perhaps it was simply the absence of Jane: she always seemed to bring everything to order, and with his mortal dread of standing in stiff collars and making polite conversation, he had been counting on her company today. Or was it something more? He had seen the many looks exchanged between the Ellison sisters, the Worthingtons, and the girls' old governess. He had seen the way the fussing of his wife had been evaded at every turn, how even Lady Charlotte had not been able to get close to the bride.

All in all, he thought it a matter worth investigating. At the very least, he reflected as he ascended the stairs to Jane's room, he needed a break from the festivities. With a little bit of luck, perhaps it would be coming to a finish by the time he got back.

"Jane? It's your father." He knocked at the door, bowing his head, and then, gathering himself, pushed it open.

The light of the candle he had brought upstairs fell on a neatly made bed. In his shock, Mr. Samuel Lloyd almost dropped it altogether. He shook his head. "Jane, what have you done?"

“What have I done?” Jane whispered to herself. She stood out on the balcony adjoining Edgar’s chamber, where she had fled as soon as Sophia had abandoned her. The night breeze was chilly: it sent her veil flapping. Before her stretched the gardens and orchards of Thurrock, swathed in soft darkness. She braced her hands on the balustrade and inhaled deeply.

“Are you all right?” His voice came drifting out from the open door behind her: he sounded tentative, uncertain. Jane stayed where she was, gazing out into the night. As long as she did not look at his face, she would not cry.

Lord Edgar Payton stepped out onto the stone balcony and came level with his bride. In a slow, gentle movement, he lifted her hand. She turned to look at him as he began to slide off her glove, and he saw the glitter of her eyes underneath the veil. He bent and kissed the bare skin of her palm. “Come inside. It’s cold.”

She allowed him to lead her back into the dimly lit room. Edgar turned from her to close the doors. The curtains, which had been flapping in the night breeze, drifted into stillness once more. When he came back to face his bride, she heard his sharp intake of breath. He took a quick step toward her.

“Your veil. You took it off.”

“It’s not mine,” Jane said softly. An exquisite warmth was blossoming inside her chest, and she turned her face up to his.

“No,” Edgar agreed, and bent his head towards hers, his hands cupping her face as he kissed her.

The Truth of the Matter

Lord Edgar Payton awoke the next morning feeling he had slept better than he had since his father's death. Someone had opened the curtains: sunlight came arcing in over the stone balcony to bathe him in warm gold. He smiled, and reached out automatically, only to clutch at emptiness.

His eyes flew open. There was an indent in the pillow beside him, but the spot had been vacated, and the sheets felt cold. Edgar rose, straightening his night shirt, and padded to his writing desk, where he found his grandmother's veil, neatly folded, and a letter beside it.

Five minutes later, he thundered down the stairs and burst into the breakfast room. Three surprised faces turned towards him: Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd were eating toast, and his mother was pouring tea. "Edgar! You slept late."

"What," said Edgar Payton, holding the folded piece of paper above his head, "is the meaning of *this*?"

"A love-letter from Bella, is it?" said Mrs. Lloyd, with a titter.

"It is not from Bella, as I'm sure you are well aware," Edgar snapped at her. "Now I will ask you again, and I expect you to answer me honestly: what kind of game are you and your husband playing?"

"Edgar, be civil," said Lady Charlotte, quite shocked. "Remember what is due to the mother of your bride."

"My bride! Ha, yes. And where might she be?" Edgar took a few striding steps towards the table, still holding up the letter. "Can either of you tell me? Hmm?"

"I think he's gone quite mad," Mrs. Lloyd murmured to her companions. "Mr. Lloyd, I declare I am quite frightened."

“Where is she?” Edgar repeated, raising his voice. “Where is Bella?”

At that moment, the door of the breakfast room opened to admit a baffled footman. “Ah—Miss Bella Lloyd, my lady.”

“Not Lloyd anymore,” laughed the mother of the bride, nudging her husband. Then she turned in her seat. “Bella, dear! Have you been out walking?”

Her youngest daughter was flushed, clad in travelling clothes, and beaming from ear to ear. “Dear Edgar,” she said brightly, tripping across the floor to greet him with a kiss on the cheek. “As you can see, I’m quite recovered, so now we can go ahead preparing for the wedding. What do you think did the trick?” She looked around at the flabbergasted faces of the company, and then laughed. “Oh! Didn’t you tell them about the bees?” Turning back to Edgar, “Well, anyway, Hubert’s housekeeper—a most charming woman—gave me a special ointment when I arrived, and it quite got rid of the swelling. I have never been so grateful to anyone in my life.”

There were several points of this speech which caused confusion, and each person present seized upon a different one. “The wedding?” repeated Lady Charlotte Payton. “The swelling?” was Mrs. Mary Lloyd’s repetition. “Hubert’s housekeeper?” repeated Lord Edgar Payton. Only Mr. Lloyd was silent, staring down into his cup of tea.

“I declare, you all seem a little slow this morning!” exclaimed Bella, with another tinkling laugh.

“Will someone,” said Lady Charlotte Payton weakly, as she sat back down in her chair, and gestured to the footman to take away the tea, “please explain what is going on?”

“You didn’t know?” Edgar was staring at Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd. “You didn’t—plan this?”

This time it was Mr. Lloyd who answered his son-in-law, in weary tones. “I believe we are all equally in the dark.”

Taking this in, Lord Edgar Payton nodded slowly, and then turned to the two footmen. “Leave us, please.” When the door of the breakfast room had swung closed, he unfolded the letter and cleared his throat, preparing to read it aloud. But as he looked up at

the faces of his mother and the Lloyds, something stopped him. Sighing, he put it back in his pocket. "It is clear that a grand deception has been carried out on us all. Instead of marrying Bella yesterday, I married Jane. And now, it seems that she has disappeared."

Dead silence greeted his pronouncement. Then, several things happened at once. Mrs. Mary Lloyd made an attempt to rise from her chair and fainted dead away, forcing Mr. Lloyd and Lady Charlotte out of their own chairs to catch hold of her before her head struck the ground. Bella Lloyd stepped up to her betrothed, icy in righteous indignation, and slapped him across the face. "How dare you?"

To go from blissful happiness to icy shock and then to sore humiliation in the space of a few minutes would have been too much for most people. For the young Duke of Thurrock, who had never experienced such a medley of strong emotions in the course of his young life, it was especially hard, and Lord Edgar Payton lost no time in absenting himself from the company, one hand on his burning cheek.

The others barely noticed. Mrs. Lloyd was now on the floor, moaning, and while her hostess attempted to revive her with smelling salts, her husband fanned her face with his napkin. None of them appeared concerned with anything but their task, and for Bella Lloyd, who had never felt so ignored in the course of *her* young life, it was too much to bear. She fled from the room weeping.

* * *

The authors of all this trouble had been wise enough to make arrangements that would take them away from Thurrock early the morning after the wedding, before their deception was discovered. For discovered they knew it must be, and with every mile that drew their post chaise closer to London and back to their former lives, the glow of their success faded until it was no more than dust and ashes.

"I'm going to go to hell," Kitty Worthington would not stop moaning, and no one could say anything to comfort her.

"Where do you think she is?" Maria Ellison was anxious to know, and no one could satisfy her on that count, either. By the time they had knocked at the door of Edgar's bedroom to summon Jane with them, as had been arranged, she was already gone.

"Perhaps he will not mind," was Sophia's feeble suggestion.

"Not Edgar," said Hubert darkly. "He is as true a fellow as they come. And we have deceived him."

A gloomy silence persisted in their carriage for some more miles, until Sophia said smartly, "Well, what is done is done. We must simply resolve to do better in the future." She turned to the others. "And we must find Jane."

* * *

The letter from Jane suffered several crumplings in the course of the day that followed, but still Edgar could not summon the will to destroy it altogether. In fact, what was most vexing was that he found himself frequently fishing it out of his pocket to read again the words that had been penned there in her small, feminine hand.

Dear Edgar,

I do not expect you to forgive me for everything that has happened. I cannot forgive myself. I was tempted, and for that, I know that I must be punished.

I took my sister Bella's place yesterday and wore the veil that had been a gift to her, so that you would not recognize who stood at your side. It was a day of stolen happiness, such as I will probably never know again. In my delight, I even managed to convince myself that perhaps you knew and were glad: that perhaps it was me who you were meant to marry all along.

I will not make excuses for my vanity. I will only say that for as long as our families have known each other, your friendship toward me has been the greatest gift of my life. It is my hope that someday I might regain it—

and that someday, you might understand how I could do such a thing.

If my sister Bella is the woman for you, then you must divorce me and marry her. I will not stand in the way of any two people in love, and so I will remain, most faithfully,

Jane Lloyd

The sky darkened around Thurrock, the last wedding guests were sent away with slices of cake and whispers of apology, and a knock sounded on the door of Edgar's chamber.

"Who is it?" he said warily.

"Samuel Lloyd," came the response, and Edgar, with some reluctance, nodded to his valet to open the door.

"Come in. Robinson, leave us, please." As the door closed, he gestured to the chair by his writing desk. "You may sit, if you like."

Mr. Lloyd's gaze shifted to the wedding veil still folded there, and he grimaced, then shook his head. "No, thank you. My lord. I would prefer to stay standing."

"Very well." The Duke of Thurrock lifted his chin, and folded his arms, squarely meeting the eye of the father of his bride. "How may I help you, sir?"

Mr. Lloyd folded his hands in front of him and took a moment before replying. "Jane is ... not like her sister."

"Of that I am now well aware," said Edgar, with a bitter laugh, but he stopped short at Mr. Lloyd's look of appeal.

"Please do not misunderstand me, Lord Payton." He made a slight face, as though the name still sounded strange on his tongue. "I am not excusing what my daughter has done. But before your father died, he spoke to me about the friendship between our two families, and how he hoped it might long continue after he was gone from this world."

"As did I." Edgar held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "But I have been left with no choice, Mr. Lloyd."

"I understand your predicament, my lord, but I must ask, for the

sake of that friendship, that you do not cut ties just yet.” Mr. Lloyd raised his eyes from his folded hands to Edgar, with the air of a subject seeking clemency. “I do not wish my daughter’s name to be mixed with any scandal ...”

“Mr. Lloyd, let me put your mind at ease,” said Edgar firmly. “I am not going to break off my engagement with Bella. I fully intend to marry her.”

“Marry Bella?” The man’s eyes were now wide. “But I was talking of Jane. If you are still to marry Bella, that would mean ...”

“Divorcing her sister. Yes. I have given the matter much careful thought.” Edgar turned his back on the other gentleman, moving to the door of his balcony. “And reluctant as I am to resort to such a measure, I can see no other recourse.”

“And I am sure Jane was fully aware of the consequences that might attend her decision.” Mr. Lloyd’s tone was low, wondering. “I would never have believed it of her ... though I suppose love makes us do strange things.”

“Do not talk to me of your daughter’s love,” Edgar said coldly.

“I will ask one more favor of you—if I must do it, I will beg, my lord ...”

“I’m sure that will not be necessary.”

“... I will ask that you wait until we have recovered Jane to divorce her.”

Speechless with surprise, Edgar turned. Mr. Lloyd continued, “Then you may do as you like. I will retire with Jane to some quiet place, away from prying eyes. But until then ...”

“You mean you don’t know yet where she has gone?” Edgar exclaimed.

Mr. Lloyd bowed his head in confirmation. Watching him for a moment more, the Duke of Thurrock drew breath, and sighed. “How long do you need?”

“It is hard to say. It might be weeks—perhaps months. But we will find her, and in the meantime, Bella will remain by your side. I

cannot think it an evil, to be better acquainted with one's potential partner before rushing into marriage." There was an inflection in Mr. Lloyd's tone which made Edgar a little uncomfortable.

"Very well, sir. Until such a time as you find Jane, I will take no action that might bring dishonor to your family."

A Fresh Start

It did not take Miss Bella Lloyd long to recover from the shock of her sister having stolen her day of happiness. The journey home from the scene of her humiliation, with all the consoling caresses and compliments of her mother that it could offer, was sufficient to restore her former spirits, and by the time their carriage had pulled up in Brunswick Square, the beginnings of a plan were even forming in her mind, as to how her return to society should play out.

The first order of business was to establish herself as more dazzling and desirable than ever, and thereby remove any possible doubt concerning her from her suitor's mind. For though Bella had never rated the attractions of her older sister very highly, and though she was certain that nothing could have induced Edgar to treat her as his bride had he not been deceived as to her identity, the whole affair in Thurrock had planted a seed of envy in her mind, and made her all the more determined to appear to the greatest advantage.

As both families were anxious to maintain the ruse of Edgar being married to Bella, it was decided that his betrothed should stay with the Paytons in their townhouse for the time being. The arrangement could not but be agreeable to her, for not only did it place her in close vicinity with the very person to whom she was anxious to recommend herself; its proximity to her parents' house allowed her to remain in that position of influence that she had held since childhood.

However, since she and Edgar were not living together as man and wife, the necessity of a chaperone was one that could not be ignored, and Bella soon determined that she should select one herself. Kitty Worthington had been extremely useful to her after the episode of the bee-sting, and accordingly she, along with Hubert's good housekeeper, had earned a place in Bella Lloyd's

favor. It did not take much persuasion to induce the young girl to stay with her and the Paytons, and within a few weeks, a very comfortable family circle had been established.

"How glad I am that you are with me, Kitty," sighed Bella one bright morning, as they trod a familiar path down Bond Street, a shop boy stumbling after them laden down with purchases. "You are so much more pleasant a companion than Jane: *she* was always so stern and frowning whenever I spent a little more money than she thought I should."

"Well, I think those ribbons were worth every penny," said Kitty.

"You really ought to keep the green one, it suits your complexion so," said Bella carelessly, as her eyes roved up and down the street at the other shoppers. "We must dazzle at the Carters'. Oh!" With an affected laugh, as Kitty glanced towards her. "My eyes must deceive me. I thought for a moment that I saw your brother coming out of Ford's."

"No, 'tis Hubert indeed!" exclaimed Kitty with artless delight, and without delay she hailed him.

"Mr. Worthington, I declare!" Bella said after he had crossed the road to join them. "I have not seen you for an age!"

"I was not aware that a fortnight's absence may be measured as such," said Hubert Worthington, with a bow in her direction.

"Oh, how droll you are! But really ..." With a flutter of her eyelashes which had never failed to be alluring to the other young men of her acquaintance, "... where have you been all this time? We have missed your company—haven't we, Kitty? So many dull evenings as we have passed." She lowered her voice. "Lady Charlotte Payton is a very worthy woman, but I am afraid she has never learned how to really entertain."

Hubert cleared his throat. "I had business back in Delingford."

"I think you have been avoiding us!" Bella accused, with a flourish of her parasol that was punctuated by another gay laugh.

"I assure you, Miss Lloyd, I would not have stayed away if it had been up to me. And now ..." Hubert glanced at the shop boy who

lingered a few paces behind them, panting, "Might I be of some assistance in your shopping?"

"We were just about to go home," Kitty said, but stopped short at the glare Bella sent in her direction.

"You are so kind, Mr. Worthington! There was one more place that I wanted to visit; if you would be so good as to accompany us to the milliner's just down the street ..."

Relieving the shop boy of some of his load, Hubert followed them into the shop with good grace, where he was able to make himself useful once more in dispersing the small crowd that had formed in front of the counter to give precedence to his lady companions.

There was now just one customer finishing business, and as she turned from the counter to face them, they saw that it was Sophia Ellison, bearing a couple of packages under one arm. Bella changed color as she saw her, and, in her anger, was rendered temporarily incapable of speech; Kitty bit her lip and looked apologetic; Hubert looked as though he wanted to say something but knew not what. The offending young lady met their gazes calmly, and in another moment had swept past them out of the shop.

"Excuse me for a moment," Hubert said hastily to Bella and Kitty, and without waiting for a response he dashed out of the shop, where he saw Sophia's figure already well advanced up the pavement. She turned as he called after her and greeted him with cold civility.

"Well?" he said, drawing up before her and ignoring the glares of passersby for obstructing the path. "How have you been?"

"I could ask you the same question," she replied in level tones, and her eyes drifted past him to the entrance of the shop. "Though perhaps I need not; it seems you have been passing your time quite pleasantly."

"I was in my estate since the wedding; I only got back last night!" Hubert said, in some agitation. "Do not misunderstand, Sophia ..."

"Miss Ellison," she corrected crisply.

"Miss Ellison," he mimicked with severity. "Why haven't you

answered my letters?"

"It is not proper for a young lady to carry on a correspondence with a gentleman to whom she is not engaged," Sophia said stiffly.

"Then it's high time for us to do something about that, isn't it?" exclaimed Hubert.

To this, Sophia could not but respond, and her reaction was so strong that it made up for her previous show of indifference. She blushed deeply, raised her eyes to Hubert's, and seemed on the point of saying something when from behind them came Bella's call, "Mr. Worthington!"

"She's waiting for you," said Sophia coolly, but Hubert was not ready to depart just yet.

"Have you no faith in me?" he demanded. "After everything we went through, with Edgar and Jane ..." He stopped short as his companion paled, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Stay a minute: you know where Jane is, don't you?" He glanced at her purchases. "Sophia, why on earth didn't you say anything—"

"Mr. Worthington!"

"You had better not keep her any longer," Sophia said smartly, and stepped away.

"Will I see you at the Carters' tonight?" he called after her, but she did not turn. With a sigh, Hubert Worthington straightened his cravat and returned to the shop.

* * *

The Forster sisters ran a respectable school for a select group of young girls ranging from the ages of five to fifteen. Their establishment was located in a smart little townhouse on Hastings Street with white steps and pretty bow windows. As Sophia Ellison came to the door, the sound of an ascending scale on a pianoforte drifted down to her from a casement on the second floor.

Of late, the Misses Forster had found themselves financially

embarrassed, and as part of their retrenchment had been forced to dismiss most of their staff. They were rather overstretched as a result, for one had assigned herself as mistress of French, drawing, and history; and the other of dancing, mathematics, and needlework. So, the sisters had been eager to accept the services offered by a respectable young woman, who declared herself happy to give music lessons for her bed and board.

The instant Sophia stepped over the threshold of the townhouse, she knew by the chaos that greeted her that the elder Miss Forster must be absent; for of the two sisters, she was the disciplinarian. At the foot of the stairs she saw one little girl pulling the hair of another; a third pupil had spilled a box of watercolors all over the landing floor, and in the midst of it all, Miss Letitia Forster ran here and there, crying ineffectually, "Children! Children! Remember, you are *ladies!*"

The sight of their refined guest provided a temporary distraction, and Sophia was forced to contend with the attentions of several pupils attempting to drag her boxes from her arms as she made her way to the stairs.

By contrast to the chaos below, the drawing room on the second floor was an oasis of peace, and Sophia entered to find Jane Payton standing beside the pianoforte while a girl of about twelve attempted to bang out a melody. "Good, very good, but try to be a little more gentle with it, Cecilia; remember, this is an instrument which must be treated with delicacy."

She rose as she saw her friend, with a look of surprise, and straightened her apron before crossing the room to kiss her on the cheek. "Sophia. You are good to come. I hope those packages are not for me."

"You will forgive me for supplying you with the necessities of existence: some stockings, a bonnet, and another apron to put over those drab gowns that you insist on wearing." Sophia cast a disapproving glance at Jane's attire.

"Sit down. You must be tired from your walk." Turning to her pupil, "Cecilia, you may return to those sight-reading exercises. I will check your progress in a few minutes."

"I am not tired in the least," Sophia said, as she obeyed her friend's injunction. They sat in a pair of stiff-backed armchairs, and she watched as Jane immediately took out some embroidery. "*I am not the one with sole charge of a dozen little terrors.*"

"I am not in charge of them," Jane contradicted her, "I just help. It is Miss Letitia who ..."

"Yes, I was able to witness her efforts downstairs," Sophia said dryly. "And where is her sister?"

"She has been at the accountant's all morning," Jane conceded with a sigh. "I had to take some of her lessons—but the girls are little dears, Sophia, truly."

Sophia did not respond for a moment, leaning forward in her chair to regard Jane more closely. Since the return of their party to London, the welfare of her friend had been among her most engrossing concerns, and having had visions of Jane wandering the streets, her relief had known no bounds when she had discovered Jane's new situation. She had been on several visits to the Forsters' establishment in the course of the last few weeks, but until today she had not seen Jane looking so ill and pale.

"You are overexerting yourself," she said now, with decision. "You are not attending to your health."

Jane Payton looked up at Sophia, and there was a resignation in her eyes which worried her more than anything else she had seen. "I must keep myself occupied. If I stop for a moment to think of what I have done, or what future might attend me ..." She drew a sharp breath and dropped her gaze to her embroidery once more.

Sophia's own self-reproach now kept her silent, where her solicitude for her friend had made her outspoken before, and they were for some minutes listening to the halting melody on the pianoforte when Jane said quietly, "I do not blame you, of course. I could have gone to Edgar and revealed everything that day, before it was too late. I blame myself: I was weak and dishonest."

"You were none of those things." Sophia spoke in a fierce whisper. "Jane, look at me. You are not to be blamed for wanting to share a night of happiness with the man you love—and the man who loves

you.”

Jane shook her head, as she mechanically drew her needle in and out of the material.

“I believe he does love you, Jane,” Sophia continued, “Even if he is too great a fool himself to see it.”

They were interrupted in their tête-a-tête by the sound of thunderous footsteps up the stairs, and a moment later, the door of the drawing room was flung open to admit a couple of giggling girls. “Miss Jane, we want to play a duet!”

“Then you must wait your turn,” Jane said with calm authority, as she put down her embroidery and rose from her chair. “Cecilia is playing now. In any case, Julianna, are you not supposed to be in geography with Miss Letitia?”

Amid the girls’ protests and pleading, Sophia squeezed her friend’s arm. “I must get ready for this evening. There is to be an evening of cards at Mrs. Carter’s.” With a look of appeal, “How I wish you could come.”

“You know that is quite impossible,” said Jane quietly, just as one of the girls began tugging at her apron.

“I will be back again tomorrow. Take care.” Sophia fixed her friend with a stern glance before addressing her young charges. “Be good for Miss Jane, won’t you?”

The sound of shouting and raucous laughter drifted after her as she stepped out of the townhouse and back into the busy streets.

* * *

The Honorable Mrs. Frances Carter was a widow whose character had little to intrigue in and of itself; but her card-parties were famous and drew good company around her like a moth to a lighted candle. The actual playing of cards was a mere pretext, of course, as most of her guests tended to be ladies who had little interest in such pursuits, and the real reason people gathered in her house in Tavistock Place was to watch and observe one another.

The arrival of the Lloyds and Paytons to that residence as the lamps were being lit was an event of interest to many, and it was Bella Lloyd's singular regret that she had no wedding band to display on her finger. But she entered the rooms on the arm of a Duke, and that had to satisfy her for the moment.

Mr. Lloyd retreated from their party at the earliest opportunity to join a whist table. Watching him go, Lady Charlotte Payton wished she had his liberty. She had been hostess to her son's betrothed for a fortnight now, and on the whole had played the part very well, but as she listened to Mary Lloyd talk on and on, and watched Bella tittering as she flitted from one group of guests to the next, she felt that she was done with the Lloyds for the time being; that was, all but one of them. Inadvertently, she found her mind returning to that black day of grief, when a bouquet of her favorite flowers had arrived for her. Her son had not read the note attached, but *she* had, and she knew who they had really come from.

In the midst of these reflections, compounded as they were of gladness and grief, Lady Charlotte thought she heard someone say the very name that had been on her mind. A moment later, she realized that one of the Miss Ellisons had said it: they were standing at the other end of the crowded drawing room, in hushed conference with one another. She frowned, and then, at a summons from one of the guests, resolved to put the observation aside for the moment, and carry out the duties required of her.

By this time, Bella Lloyd was experiencing a state as close to perfect happiness as a creature of her substance could probably reach: she was center stage once more, surrounded by fashionable people, all of whom wanted to know every last detail of her wedding day. It is therefore unsurprising that in the face of such attentions, Bella found it easy to forget the resolution she and Edgar had made not to speak of the event except among family, and so it was that when the Duke of Thurrock returned from his sojourn in the cardroom to pay his respects to the hostess, he found the woman to whom he was not yet married in the middle of describing her exact sensations as she had walked down the aisle.

"Excuse us for a moment," Edgar said in a low, restrained voice, before taking Bella's arm and steering her away from the company.

“Whatever is the matter?” she demanded as he brought her out to the landing, which was a little less crowded and hot. “Why do you look so severe?”

Edgar stared at her in disbelief. “Can’t you guess?”

Bella shook her head, with a merry sparkle in her eyes as she continued to smile up at him. “I don’t have the slightest idea. I only wish that you would stop frowning so. It doesn’t suit you. Let me make you smile again.” She reached for him, but Edgar caught hold of her hand, and lowered it to her side.

“Pretty speeches are all very well, Bella, but you can’t go inventing details about our wedding day just to entertain others!” He lowered his voice, with a glance at the door into the drawing room, which stood ajar.

“Why not?” she said petulantly.

“Because it’s not proper!” Edgar exclaimed. “And it’s not true.”

Something changed in Bella’s face as she watched him; her eyes narrowed and her mouth set, and Edgar had the sudden sensation that he was looking at a stranger. The feeling passed as suddenly as it had come, and her face resumed its normal, innocent attitude.

“Since you seem so determined to be cross this evening,” she said lightly, “you will not blame me if I wish to return to my friends.” She stepped back into the drawing room, her gown rustling, and Edgar was left alone on the landing. He advanced to the railing, looked down at the groups assembled around the stairs below, and cursed under his breath.

As the evening drew on, more and more of the ladies invited began to grow tired of the conversation in the drawing room and decided instead to watch the progress of the gentlemen at cards, some of them joining in the games. Sophia and Maria Ellison were among the first to do so, and they had not been there for five minutes when they were followed by Bella Lloyd, who swept past them without a glance and seated herself at her mother’s table.

“I have never played this game before,” she said in carrying tones, “and if someone would explain the rules to me, I would be much obliged.”

"I should be happy—" began Mrs. Lloyd.

"Mr. Worthington!" Bella said brightly as that gentleman passed their table, silencing her mother with a look. "Would you be so kind as to instruct me?"

"It would be my pleasure," said Hubert as he took the empty seat beside her, and then, in an undertone, "But where is Edgar?"

"He is not in humor this evening," replied Bella, with a heavy sigh. "Now, what on earth am I supposed to do with my hand?"

The game at the neighboring table soon began to suffer from having not one but two distracted players, as whenever the tinkling laughter of Bella Lloyd did not attract the censuring glance of Lady Charlotte Payton, they were sure to provoke a glower or two from the eldest Ellison sister. At length, Sophia set down her cards with unexpected violence and rose from the table.

"Are you quite well, Miss Ellison?" cried Lady Charlotte, in some alarm, while Bella and her mother remained in cold silence.

"I am a little hot," Sophia said through gritted teeth. "You must excuse me." She did not look at the offending table as she passed it but felt many eyes on her retreating figure. Pausing at the door, she saw Edgar just outside; he barely seemed to see her, his eyes fixed on some point past her while an uncertain frown marred his brow.

The cool night air outside did little to calm her temper as the carriage was brought around, and somewhere along the journey home, Sophia stopped the coachman to redirect him. They drove past the dark gates of Regent's Square to Hastings Street, and she stepped out by the Forsters' establishment, in whose windows a few lights lingered on the upper floor. A yawning maidservant showed her the way up to Miss Jane's room, and Sophia knocked tentatively before pushing the door open.

"Jane?"

The narrow room was dim, lit only by the candle which Jane held as she sat on her window seat in only her nightgown. She was crying, and looked as though she had been doing so for some time. Sophia flew to her drawers, took a shawl and put it around her friend's shoulders, seized her hands, felt her forehead. "What is it,

Jane?”

It was some time before Jane could answer her, and Sophia, in the most horrible suspense, found such sensations only increased by her friend's words. “I had a visit this evening from the physician.”

“Tell me, Jane ...” Sophia moaned, “Tell me at once and have it done.”

“I am with child.”

With shining eyes, Sophia embraced her friend only to have her burst into fresh tears. “But that is wonderful! Oh, Jane, why are you crying?”

“What will become of me?” Jane's voice was very small, as she gently detached herself from Sophia and hid her face in the folds of her nightgown. “What will become of the baby?”

“You have friends, Jane,” Sophia said fervently. “You are not alone.”

“I wish to be alone,” were her friend's next words, but at this Sophia shook her head, firm in her resolution.

“I am going to stay with you, Jane.” And this being said, she put her arms about her friend and forgot her own sorrow in contemplation of the happy event ahead.

The Scales Fall

Bella Lloyd was not accustomed to being disappointed.

Of course, there had been the unpleasantness in Thurrock, but she did not like to think about such things. In short, Bella expected the best from the people around her, and truly believed that her own behavior merited such returns. She saw nothing to censure in her own behavior at the Carters' party; on the contrary, in her eyes she had been at her most charming self, and therefore fully expected to be visited by her card partner on the following morning.

She wore her prettiest day-gown, had Lady Charlotte's maid dress her hair in an especially pretty style, and plumped the cushions in the drawing room as she waited. The morning passed slowly; taking a leaf from her sister's book, Bella sat down with one of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances but could not get past the first page. There was some embroidery that Lady Charlotte had asked her to do a few days ago, but she quickly decided that she was too agitated to put her mind to any such delicate work. Every step on the landing outside the drawing room made her jump from her seat, as she thought it must be him. But it never was.

For although Bella Lloyd preferred not to dwell on such unpleasant events as the deception that had been practiced upon her on the day before her wedding, there was one aspect of it which renewed itself in her mind every time she attempted to be tranquil. Her short stay at Delingford, where Hubert Worthington had been so kind and gentlemanly to her, and his housekeeper so pleasant, and his sister downright charming, could not but return to her recollection at every opportunity, and despite her confused state at a time, Bella could hardly have helped noticing that Hubert's estate was every bit as grand and well-appointed as Edgar's. Its situation was actually superior, for it was not down in the dark hills but high in an airy glen, and considering her own mishap in Thurrock, the lack of a forested environment was another appealing quality.

As high as she merited her own claims, however, and as charming as she had felt herself to be at the Carters', Bella Lloyd was not above admitting when she had been mistaken. She simply lacked the ability to do so with good grace. Accordingly, as the clock above the mantelpiece in Lady Charlotte's drawing room struck noon, and the door opened to admit not Mr. Hubert Worthington but his sister instead, Bella was in very bad humor indeed.

"Well?" she said coldly, as her dear companion seated herself by her side. "Did you have a fine time last night?"

"Oh! Miss Bella, I do not know when I have enjoyed an evening more ..."

"Lady Payton," Bella corrected, turning her head toward the window so that her impressive profile appeared to her companion. "You must address me so even when we are alone, for that is my rightful title."

"Of—of course it is, Miss ... my lady, but forgive me, since you are not yet married to Lord Payton, I thought—"

"Not yet married! Yes," with an unpleasant laugh, "And whose doing was that, dear Kitty?"

Kitty Worthington blushed to the roots of her hair, looking down. "I—I am sure, my lady, that my brother is very sorry for what he did ..."

"I was not talking of your brother," snapped Bella. "I was talking of you, and your friends, and my sister. For you are more Jane's friend than mine, isn't that right? You always have been!"

"Oh, Miss Bella ... I mean, my lady ..." Kitty pressed forward in her seat, penitent. "I was Jane's friend, before, it's true, but I have not seen or heard from her since—"

"You are lying." Bella Lloyd turned again in her chair and fixed Kitty with a hard stare which the poor girl found quite alarming. "You were with her all this morning, weren't you? You know where she's hiding."

"My lady, I was visiting the shops this morning with Maria. I don't know where Jane is hiding. If I did, I would tell you; you must

believe me!”

“Don’t presume to tell me what I must and mustn’t do,” said Bella calmly. She rose from her chair and straightened her skirts before gliding away towards the piano. “Now I’ve had enough of your nonsense for today: go away and leave me.”

“My lady ...”

Bella whirled. “Go on! Get out of my sight!”

With a sob, Kitty Worthington fled the drawing room, and Bella felt only a glimmer of self-satisfaction before her bad humor descended on her once more. She glowered out the window at the dull, rainy streets, and in that moment wished herself back at home, with her mother’s sweet words and caresses.

“Bella?”

Composing her features into a smile, Bella turned from the window. “Oh! My dear, you are up!”

“I have been up for some time,” said Edgar Payton, a little uncomfortably, as he stood in the threshold watching her. “I was in need of some exercise, so I left the house quite early to go walking.”

“You should have asked me! You know how fond I am of walking.” Bella took a few graceful steps towards her betrothed, taking care that her skirts rustled becomingly, and pouted. “I have been languishing here all morning, alone and friendless.”

Edgar glanced behind him. “I just saw Kitty Worthington leaving; she seemed quite distressed.”

“Oh! Yes, we had a little disagreement,” said Bella, after a moment’s pause. “But it was silly; I would not bore you with the details.”

“Did it have something to do with her brother?”

In one of the greatest efforts of her life, Bella endeavored to conceal her delight at the expression on her betrothed’s face. “Oh, Edgar, dear.” She came right up to him, and he looked down at her as she placed her hands on his chest, making a show of straightening his cravat. “I hope you are not jealous. I am so fond of dancing, you know, and since you were so very cross last night, I am sure you

cannot blame me for wanting a pleasant partner."

"Yes, of course," Edgar replied, in some confusion. "I am—sorry, that I was not in better humor."

"You are forgiven." With a twinkling of her eye, Bella stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "And now, can we go and amuse ourselves? I have been longing for a bonnet I saw in Cartwright's the other day."

Her betrothed glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "But surely it is too late for shopping. Mother has just ordered lunch to be on the table in half an hour ..."

"*Edgar*. I have been inside all morning like a chicken in a coop. I must get some fresh air." Bella looped her arm through Edgar's and leaned her head on his shoulder, all the while never dropping her eyes from his. "Surely your mother would understand."

* * *

Mr. Henry Angelo and Gentleman Jackson of No. 13 Bond Street instructed many wealthy and fashionable young men in the art of fencing, but seldom had they ever seen two such as Edgar Payton and Hubert Worthington, who appeared on the whole to regard fencing as a mere excuse for conversation. The confounded Mr. Angelo would sometimes watch for ten minutes together before either player made a move, and today was no exception.

"Hubert?" said Edgar, wiping nonexistent sweat from his brow as he ward off the first of his friend's thrusts. "Can I ask your opinion on something?"

Hubert fell back and tipped up his visor so that Edgar could see his wary eyes. "It does not concern myself," the duke of Thurrock hastened to add, "but a friend of mine." As Hubert opened his mouth, "With whom you are not acquainted. This gentleman has a considerable fortune and estate, and he is—er—very much attached to a young lady of somewhat ... inferior circumstances."

"Ah," said Hubert, laying his sabre aside. "That is difficult; what I would advise ..."

"I haven't finished yet," Edgar interrupted, peevishly. "The friends and family of this gentleman have always warned him about the dangers of falling prey to fortune-hunters, but he never—er—believed such warnings, nor did he think to apply them to the young lady with whom he is entangled."

There was a silence. "But let me guess," Hubert said slowly. "This young lady has, of late, begun to show warning signs that hint at a more mercenary nature?"

Edgar tipped up his own visor, met his friend's gaze, and nodded grimly. "Unfortunately. And my friend is unsure of what he ought to do. He might be mistaken, of course, in his suspicions."

"Of course," Hubert said smoothly. He tilted his head to one side, considering, and then seized up his sabre again. As he advanced toward Edgar, "Perhaps a test might then be in order."

"A test?" Edgar repeated, as he sidestepped his friend's advance and threw up his blade in defense.

"Invent a fire," Hubert said easily, meeting Edgar's blade with his and maneuvering his way around it. As his friend looked at him blankly, he sighed. "Really, Edgar, you ought to have learned this trick by now. You tell the young lady in question that there has been a terrible fire on your property, and all that now remains at your disposal is a modest living: enough to sustain you and her, but no more."

There was a silence, as both friends circled one another. Edgar made a feint towards his friend's left shoulder, and then struck to his right instead. "You are forgetting one thing, Hubert." As his friend was knocked back a few steps, "I cannot lie to Bella."

* * *

As it was Sunday, the ladies of the Forsters' establishment on Hastings Street were enjoying a respite from their usual duties. The two Misses Forsters set out early to attend service, and Sophia and Jane, who had sat up all night together, were soon joined by Maria and Kitty. The four friends, overjoyed at being reunited, filled the

drawing room with their chatter and laughter.

"I was afraid that you had abandoned us for good," Sophia accused Kitty, after they had been sitting together above an hour. "For the *enemy*."

"My sister does not deserve that title," Jane admonished, but even she could not hold back a smile. "It is good to see you, Kitty. It's good to see all of you."

"I just hope you didn't tell Bella Lloyd all of our secrets," said Maria, with a toss of her head. As her sister threw her a warning look, "Well, it is true that Kitty can't keep a secret for her life."

Kitty, who had gone bright red, began to protest such a charge, but was interrupted by a knock at the door. The maidservant came in and curtsied. "Lady Charlotte Payton."

Instantly they were all on their feet and exchanging worried glances with one another. But when the Dowager Duchess of Thurrock came over the threshold, there was nothing but kindness in her eyes.

"I do not wish to push my way in when I am not wanted," she said, after all the necessary civilities had been exchanged, "But after seeing Miss Ellison and her sister at the Carters' last night, I found myself curious. So, I followed your carriage ..." With a glance at Sophia, "And made some inquiries."

Jane had gone white as death, even as Lady Charlotte came forward and took her hands. "Jane. I am here not as Edgar's mother, but as a friend. If there is anything I can do to ease your burden, let me do it."

"You are very kind, my lady," Jane said, in a strangled voice, "But there is nothing."

"Are you sure?" Lady Charlotte regarded her closely. "You look pale. Indeed, if I did not know better, I would say that you were—" Here she stopped short, for Jane had given an involuntary sob.

"She is." Sophia came forward and handed her friend a handkerchief, which she pressed over her face. "But you mustn't tell Edgar yet. She doesn't want him to know."

"But Edgar must know!" Lady Charlotte declared, and then, as Jane

dissolved into fresh tears, hastily added, "Of course I will not tell him, my dear." She cast a significant look at Sophia. "Not *yet*, in any case."

As the day lengthened into afternoon, the other girls left to return to their houses. Sophia was the last to depart and would only agree to take some exercise while Lady Charlotte stayed with Jane.

When she reached Regent's Square, however, a steady, persistent rain started. Pushing the gate open with one hand, Sophia proceeded down the path, doing her best to stay under the canopy of the trees that lined either side.

The path before her being deserted, she was naturally alarmed when her arm was seized.

"What are you doing out in this?" It was Hubert, and he appeared quite angry, as he fiddled with the catch of an umbrella.

"*That* is none of your concern." Sophia splashed on ahead.

"Don't be a dolt, Sophia!" He ran to catch up with her, and she reluctantly stopped as he opened the umbrella over her head. "Do you want to catch your death?"

She did not dignify that with a response, and after a moment, her companion burst forth again, "I've had a—a most splendid idea, about what to do with Bella and Edgar." He cast an eye over her wet clothes. "Why don't you come back to my house and we can discuss it together. My cook can make you a nice broth, so you won't get sick. It really is a very splendid ..."

"I have no interest in any ideas of yours."

"Why, Sophia! Don't tell me you're upset about my helping Bella Lloyd with her cards last night." Hubert stared at her. "It was nothing. And you know, without my help, your plan would never have come off at all."

"You are right." Suddenly, inexplicably, Sophia found herself close to tears. "And it would have been better that way. We should never have interfered at all." She forced herself to look up, just once: Hubert was gazing at her with an unreadable expression in his eyes. "Now Jane is alone, and unhappy."

"Edgar cares for her." A strange quality had crept into Hubert's voice now, but Sophia did not dare look again. "She is his wife."

"Only because of our deception." Sophia shook her head, still looking down. "I can't play any more games with people's hearts, Hubert. I am sorry. Goodbye."

"At least take my umbrella, here—Sophia! *Sophia!*" Alone and forlorn, Hubert Worthington stood in the pouring rain as Sophia Ellison ran away, and snapped his umbrella closed with a curse. If she insisted on walking in the rain, then so would he.

Disconsolate, he bent his steps first to the Paytons' townhouse. He was dismayed to find, inside, that things had already been set in motion there, as Edgar greeted him in the hall with a confused expression on his face. "There is a lawyer here. He insisted on speaking with Bella alone. They are up in the library now."

"Oh, Lord, I forgot." Hubert threw up his hands in helplessness. "He's my lawyer; *I* told him to come here."

"For what purpose?" Edgar demanded.

"To tell Miss Lloyd that there has been a devastating fire in Thurrock." As Edgar stared, "Well, since you said you couldn't lie to her, I thought that perhaps someone else might."

The Duke of Thurrock shook his head in slow disbelief. "Unaccountable. Your continued interference in my affairs—and my continued tolerance of it—is unaccountable to me." Turning to the butler, "You may show Mr. Worthington out."

* * *

Upstairs in the library, Bella Lloyd sat fidgeting in a stiff chair while the lawyer rambled on and on about Edgar's estate. Her mind was so busy and distracted that she was not really listening at all, and at the first interval of silence that the dull creature allowed her, she interjected,

"Mr. ... Graham, is it? May I ask you a question?"

“Yes, my lady. Of course.” The lawyer, looking up from his papers for the first time, blinked at her with watery eyes.

Bella Lloyd drummed her fingers on the desk and thought for a moment before she spoke again. “What can you tell me about divorce law?”

Edgar was waiting outside the library door as the meeting concluded. It had gone on rather longer than he had expected, and when the lawyer had taken his leave, he took Bella’s arm and walked with her down the corridor as he began to explain. “You must understand; it was all some trick of Hubert’s ...”

Bella Lloyd turned to Edgar. “I want to move the wedding up.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to wait any longer.” She moved until she was standing in front of him and gave one of her tinkling laughs. “You know I detested lying to those people at Carter’s.”

Edgar looked down at her and swallowed. He took a moment to respond. “I understand your impatience, Bella, but the difficulties involved ...”

“You mean the divorce?” Bella did not drop her eyes from his, even as the smile remained on her lips.

“Yes.” A little flustered now, Edgar detached his arm from hers and ran a hand through his hair. “I cannot divorce Jane *in absentia* ...”

“But you can!” Bella said eagerly. “I was just consulting with Mr. Graham, and he told me that in cases such as yours, the husband can act alone in suing for divorce. It would take a private act of Parliament, of course, but with your connections, I’m sure it could be no great difficulty.”

There was a silence. “What’s the matter?” Bella said playfully. “Don’t you want to get this mess with Jane out of the way so we can be happy?”

“I ... of course ... but ...” Edgar shut his eyes, overwhelmed. “I made a promise to your father, the day after the wedding, that I would wait a few months before taking action.”

“Oh, phoo! Don’t mind Father; he has always been silly about Jane.” Bella took his hand. “But Edgar: do look at me.” As he obliged, she smiled broadly. “I simply *can’t* wait any longer. Please don’t ask it of me. I love you too much.”

Lord Edgar Payton bowed his head, kissed Bella’s hand, and let it go. He found himself incapable of speech, but Bella made up for it. All the rest of the evening, at dinner, in the drawing room, and at tea, she talked on, planning and preening, while the two Paytons sat in silence, each wrapped in their own thoughts.

Prelude in C

It was only July, but the chill that descended upon London foretold of autumn. In Brunswick Square, the trees bowed down under the wind. Lady Charlotte watched the leaves striking the window pane of her bedroom as her maid brushed her hair.

She was surprised by the quiet of the house as she came downstairs. It reminded her of the day her dear Andrew had passed away; the silence that had surrounded her then had been laden with sorrow. Little had she known at that time how quickly things would change, how soon she would be swept into the wave of activity preceding her son's wedding.

Edgar was not in the breakfast room, but the pork bones and eggshells left on a plate told of his recent departure, and she soon found him in his father's old study. Naturally enough, the air inside was musty, as no one had been in the place since Lord Andrew's death; even the servants had been forbidden to enter. Her son was standing by the window with his hands folded behind his back, looking upon the same view that had greeted Lady Charlotte in her own room.

"Where is Bella this morning?"

"She went next door, to see her parents. There is much planning to do." Turning his profile toward her, Edgar frowned, and seemed to be debating something inside himself for a moment before he said at last, "She wishes to be married by Michaelmas."

"Michaelmas?" repeated the Dowager Duchess, laughing a little. "But that will be quite impossible, Edgar!"

"Difficult, Mother, but not impossible." Edgar returned his gaze to the window, gloomily. "Father had a few friends on the bench. I could get a private act of Parliament passed in a few months to allow for a quick divorce. Of course, it will be very costly, but ..."

"It is not the expense that worries me," interrupted his mother, "It is the scandal involved. I confess I am shocked by Bella's thoughtlessness. The good name of her family will be dragged through the mud!"

"If she is thoughtless, it is her warm heart that makes her so." Edgar turned to face her. "She loves me, Mother, I am sure of it. It would be very hard to subject her to a long wait."

"And what about Jane?" Lady Charlotte demanded, unwilling to dispute her son's words. "Have you considered what might become of her?"

Edgar was silent for a time. "Jane chose to leave my protection. My honor was engaged; I would have stayed by her side and provided for her, had she not fled."

"And don't you think that Jane knew that?" Her temper now roused by the memory of the pale, careworn face that she had seen only yesterday, Lady Charlotte continued, "She chose to leave because she wished to make things right. She did not wish to be a burden to you."

"Then she should not have deceived me in the first place." With an air of decision, Lord Edgar Payton moved past his mother and towards the study door. "I must be getting on. I shall have to go to our lawyer and consult him as to how I ought to proceed with this. There is much to be done."

"Edgar." Lady Charlotte spoke very quietly, and his son paused with his hand on the door. "There is something about Jane that you should know."

The Duke of Thurrock sighed. "And what is that, Mother?"

Lady Charlotte considered for a long moment. As she looked at her son, she found it hard to believe that he was not still the boy who had rolled hoops outside on the road as the little Lloyd girls clapped their hands. His fair, curly hair was just as it had always been, and his eyes, as severe as their expression was now, held that same kindness that had warmed her heart in days gone by. But he was a man now, and he had to make his own decisions. Besides that, it was not her secret to tell. So, she sighed, and said instead,

“She loves you, Edgar. That is all.”

* * *

Mr. Samuel Lloyd was a man who was never happier than when he was alone in his library, reading some particularly dull sermon. He found little enjoyment in the company of others, with the exception of his daughter Jane, and in her absence over the past few weeks had withdrawn even more into his own corner of solitude. The only occasions on which he now left the house were when his search for Jane had yielded some lead, through the inquiry of an acquaintance, but in each case it had come to nothing.

His wife and youngest daughter, of course, had never understood Mr. Lloyd's inclination for his own company, and ordinarily felt it their duty to relieve him of such miserable seclusion by way of interruptions to his study that were as frequent as they were irksome.

On that particular morning, when the cold winds were blowing leaves about Brunswick Square, Mr. Lloyd was therefore rather surprised to discover that he had enjoyed a period of unbroken solitude since breakfast. He had made more progress with his reading than he could have thought possible, and no busy female had come tripping in to tell him of some gossip he did not wish to hear.

It was not long, however, before this quiet began to disconcert him, and soon after that came the realization that he could not focus on his reading until he had discovered the cause. So, Mr. Lloyd put down his book, took off his glasses, and willingly ventured out into the unknown.

The sound of a conversation being carried out in furious whispers reached his ear as he passed the door of the drawing room, which stood ajar. Discerning his wife and Bella's voices, he stopped. Many times, Mr. Lloyd had lectured those very same females on the impropriety of eavesdropping, but now, in his anxiety to hear something of their conversation, he found himself descending to their level, and acknowledged the reversal with a sorrowful shake

of the head.

“... I have it on good authority, Mama. Kitty Worthington came to me yesterday direct from the school where they have been hiding Jane. It is just like her, too, to try and turn Kitty against me. Though I suspect Sophia Ellison is wrapped up in it, too.”

“So, all this time, Jane has been just a few miles away from us?” Mrs. Lloyd exclaimed. “Why, I could wring that girl’s neck! Does she mean to seduce Edgar back to her?”

“I can think of no other reason for her remaining so close,” replied a voice which Mr. Lloyd could only assume must be Bella’s—though he had never heard her speak in such calm, cold tones before. “Perhaps she has even made it up about the child. In any case, if he finds out, he will feel himself bound to her.”

“And then you won’t get him!” her mother concluded. “Well! Of all the jealous, spiteful creatures ...”

Mr. Lloyd, with an effort, detached himself from his position and tiptoed away, his mind racing. In some confusion, he made it down to the hall, stepped out of the front door, and then returned again for his coat. As he was stepping out onto the threshold for the second time, he came face to face with Miss Sophia Ellison. She looked frantic.

“Mr. Lloyd! H-have you seen Hubert? I have been searching for him everywhere.”

“Why should Mr. Worthington be here?” Mr. Lloyd responded, with a calm which he did not feel.

“I—don’t know, I just thought ...”

“Come, Miss Ellison.” Kindly but firmly, Mr. Lloyd beckoned her down the steps leading from the house and held out his arm. “Why don’t we take a little walk?”

“But, Mr. Lloyd, there isn’t time,” Sophia exclaimed as she dashed down the steps after him.

“We can call at Mr. Worthington’s house on our way.”

“On our way to where?”

"To the school." Mr. Lloyd turned and fixed her with a penetrating glance. "Where it seems my daughter, Jane, has been languishing."

Swallowing, Sophia Ellison took his arm and started forth on her halting explanations as the wind buffeted them along through the square.

* * *

"Why did you follow me here?" Lord Edgar Payton asked of Hubert Worthington. The two young gentlemen were standing in the lobby of the building whose first floor hosted the offices of the Paytons' lawyer. The furniture was clean and modern, and a clerk had greeted them on entry and taken charge of their coats and hats. "Are you going to try to stop me?"

Hubert sighed. He had shadows under his eyes, as though he had not slept the night before, and the shirt under his waistcoat was rumpled. "I know there's no use in arguing with you, when you've set your mind to something."

"Very wise of you." Edgar reached into his pocket for his eyeglasses and put them on. Hubert watched him.

"But there is something that I wish to say." He cleared his throat. "I never apologized properly for deceiving you. I know it is unpardonable; but I did have my reasons for doing what I did." Hubert looked down at his hands. "I wished to get closer to someone: someone whom I care for very deeply, and who, I thought, cared for me too."

After an awkward pause, Edgar reached out and patted Hubert's shoulder. "It's all right. You're my friend, and I forgive you. And Sophia, for that matter."

"She never thought of the consequences," Hubert went on, with a rueful smile, "She only thought of Jane, and what was due to her. If she had consulted her friend first, of course, instead of thinking that she knew best—" He looked up again. "What?"

Edgar was gazing at his friend, eyes wide with surprise. "Do you mean that Jane didn't know what you were planning?"

"Not until the ceremony. Though I suppose she guessed that something was afoot when they put her in her sister's wedding dress." Hubert gave a laugh that was somewhat forced, but Edgar did not join in. He was remembering the hand that had trembled in his as they stood on the threshold of his house, in the blinding sunlight.

"Lord Payton?" Both men turned to see that the clerk had entered again. "Mr. Thompson has finished with his client now. You may come up to his office."

Edgar gave himself a shake. He felt as though he were waking up from a long sleep. With an effort, he turned back to Hubert. "Perhaps she is more innocent than I thought—Jane, that is. But she could have stopped the wedding at any moment: she could have told the truth."

"Edgar ..." Hubert began, shaking his head, but his friend held up a hand.

"Thank you for coming with me. But you cannot change my mind about this. Bella is my betrothed, and I must do my duty to her." Squaring his shoulders, Edgar followed the baffled clerk out of the room. He only paused once as he was passing through the stuffy corridor upstairs, when he caught sight of a vase containing a bunch of lilies. It had been placed on the sill of a small window, through which weak streams of sunlight swam through.

"My lord." The lawyer was waiting for him at the door of his office. "Come in. We have much to discuss."

* * *

Jane sat with her chin on a hand and listened as her pupil picked her way through Bach's Prelude in C. At the fifth repetition of one of the chords, she rose from her chair. "Lucy, would you stop for a moment?"

Her pupil obediently stopped, turning her curious face toward her teacher's. She was around twelve, with plain hair and pretty eyes. Jane sighed and walked over, pausing beside the piano stool and

lightly placing a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You are very talented, Lucy, and I can tell you have an instinct for this music. But you're just not practicing enough."

"I practice for half an hour before every lesson!" the girl protested.

"But you only have a lesson once a week," Jane said gently. "And you simply won't improve unless you practice more. You must teach yourself discipline, Lucy. It is a skill that will help you later in life, whatever sorrow or strife you might endure." She paused, considering. "I can tell you that it has helped me."

They both turned as the door to the music room swung open, and in strode Bella Lloyd. Her face was flushed, eyes flashing with anger as she declared dramatically, "So *this* is where you have been hiding!"

Jane straightened, dropped her hand from her pupil's shoulder and met her sister's eye with as much calm as she could muster. "Bella. May I take your pelisse?"

"Never mind that," her sister snapped. "I shall not be staying long, I assure you."

Jane did not drop her gaze as she said quietly, "Lucy, I'm sorry, but I must talk to my sister. We will continue our lesson later." Wide-eyed, the little girl closed her piano book obediently and padded out of the room, glancing back once as she passed out the door. "How did you find me, Bella?"

"Kitty told me," her sister said. "I'd heard a rumor that you were nearby, so I asked her to come visit yesterday. She had just been to see you."

Jane nodded slowly as she took this in and took a step toward her sister. "I am sorry—" she began.

"I could hardly believe it, when she told me you were here." Bella stared at her. Her mouth was pressed in a thin line, two spots of color in her cheeks. "I thought you must have fled the country in shame, after what you did."

"I wanted to," Jane said, "But I did not have the means—"

"Nonsense! You wanted to stay close to Edgar. You have always wanted whatever I have, haven't you?"

"I did envy you, when your engagement was first announced, but that was because ..."

"There, so you admit it" Bella's eyes gleamed in triumph. "Mother often said so. But it is not right, you know, Jane, to steal someone else's beau, just because you're afraid of ending up an old maid."

"I am not afraid of that," Jane said in a low voice.

"But of course," her sister went on, as though she had not heard her, "Your situation is rather difficult now, isn't it?" She glanced around the music room. "You can't go on teaching here much longer. The Miss Forsters are bound to find out your secret, and then what will you do?" At her sister's shocked look, "Oh, yes, I've heard all about *that*, too. But I can help you." She stretched out her hands towards her sister and smiled, her whole demeanor changing in the blink of an eye. "Won't you let me help you, Jane?"

"You are very kind, Bella," Jane said carefully, as she turned toward the piano and began to busy herself with the sheet music that was piled on the stool. "But I do not need your help."

"But I think you *do*." She heard her sister advance forward until she was level with her, and press something into her hand. "Which is why I have booked you passage on the next packet ship sailing for Paris. The mail coach will be leaving for Falmouth tonight, and you will be on it."

Jane looked down at the ticket her sister had given her, and slowly sat on the piano stool as her knees gave away. Bella squeezed beside her, putting an arm about her shoulders. "You can leave this dreadful place, Jane, and start afresh. In France, I'm sure that your child would have a better future. They don't mind so much about divorce and scandal there." At her sister's intake of breath, she added, pleasantly, "Oh, yes. You see, Edgar and I wish to get married as soon as possible, and we can only do so once he has divorced *you*. It will take a few months, of course, but everything ought to be settled by Michaelmas."

The piano keys blurred before Jane. She did her best to blink the tears away, as, without looking around at her sister, she spoke her gratitude.

“Don’t be silly! You know I would do anything for you, Jane. And I forgive you for that other business, too.” Bella rose from the piano stool, shook out her skirts, and smiled down at her older sister. “Well! I must be going. There’s so much to arrange for the wedding. Safe journey, dear Jane.”

“I wish you every happiness,” Jane said numbly.

Lord Edgar Payton was waiting in the corridor outside the music room, and Bella Lloyd gave a start of surprise as she pulled the door closed behind her. “Darling! What are you doing here?”

Her betrothed had a high color, and when he spoke, his voice sounded distant. “I was worried, when I found you were not at home. I was directed to this place.”

“Well! Now you see I’ve arranged everything so nicely.” Bella looked up at him, and then frowned as something occurred to her. “I told no one I was here. Who directed you?”

“I did.” From down the corridor came the sound of footsteps, and she gasped as Sophia Ellison rounded the corner, followed by Hubert and Mr. Lloyd. “Kitty told me that you knew about Jane’s secret. I thought you might pay her a visit.”

“Well—what does that signify?” Bella demanded. Her flush had spread to her white neck now. “Since the secret’s out, I might as well be frank about it: Jane cannot stay here in her condition!” She turned to Edgar, with a look of appeal. “I wanted to settle things, to ease the way for us. With my sister out of the country, we can get married as soon as the divorce passes, and ...”

“Is that why you went behind my back?” he asked slowly. “You ought to have consulted me first.”

“I didn’t think!” Bella exclaimed. “Edgar, dear, of course you’re right. I’m sorry.”

There was a silence, and then Edgar advanced to the music room door. “I must speak to Jane about this.”

Biting her lip, Sophia moved to stop him, but was restrained by Hubert.

“Our time of interfering is over,” he told her quietly, holding her

arms as she glared up at him. "Is that not so, Mr. Lloyd?"

"Quite so," Mr. Samuel Lloyd replied wearily. He had made a parallel movement, to stop Bella from following her betrothed into the room. "Come: let's wait downstairs."

The world had shrunk around Jane until all it encompassed were the four walls of a music room, and for an immeasurable time she was deaf to all sounds. Her heart squeezed in her chest so painfully that she thought it might burst; her throat ached with unshed tears, and her head began to pound dully. One hand moved absentmindedly to her stomach as though to protect the little spark of life inside her, and the other to the yellowed piano keys.

Music had ever been her solace in difficult times, and soon, as her right hand began to play a familiar melody, Jane felt some semblance of life returning to her. Her left hand moved to join her right, and soon she was able to exert herself enough to lift her head and regard the sheet music on the stand before her. She was even able to keep the tremble out of her voice as she heard the door open once more. "Ah, Lucy, I am so sorry we were interrupted. Now, I suggest that you come close to watch my hand movements for this piece. Pay careful attention; I want you to try this in a moment."

She was greeted only with silence, but still could not bring herself to look around, for fear that her pupil would see the tears in her eyes. So, she waited, and played on, until the shadow that had fallen over the sheet music told her someone was standing behind her.

Jane was readying herself to turn the page onto the final few notes when a hand reached out and did it for her. It had a signet ring on its third finger, and evidently belonged to a man. Her fingers stumbled and stopped. "You're not Lucy," she said foolishly.

"No, I'm not," said Lord Edgar Payton, drawing back his hand again as she turned on the piano stool to look at him. In an instant she was up, ready to flee, but he moved after her. "Jane, please. I want to talk to you."

She stopped, reluctantly, blinking away her tears. "How did you find me? Did Bella tell you? It was supposed to be a secret—it was supposed to be ..."

“Jane.”

“But this is all wrong!” she exclaimed, in growing agitation.

“What’s wrong,” Edgar said, in low, measured tones, “is how Bella just spoke to you. I was outside: I heard it all, and I must tell you now, Jane, that to send you away was not part of my plan ...”

“But you do wish to divorce me?” Jane finally summoned the strength to turn and face him. “That part was true, was it not?”

Edgar looked pained. He began to shake his head, as he averted his gaze from her. “I didn’t ... that is ... it was Bella who ...”

“You don’t need to be kind.” Strangely, his uncertainty made her more certain, and she took a step toward him. “Edgar.” At the sound of his first name, he met her eye again. “Didn’t you read my letter?”

“Of course, I did,” he said. There was an edge to his voice now, as he reached into his pocket to draw out a creased square of paper. He brandished it at her as though to illustrate some point, though Jane hardly knew what. She sighed.

“Then you’ll recall that I said I didn’t want to come between you and Bella. You must believe me, Edgar, when I say this: I could never be happy if I knew I had taken you from the person you love.” She made herself hold his gaze, even though with every moment the lump in her throat was growing. “I have no wish to be a burden, and I do not need your protection. I have friends, and a father who loves me. That is more than most people have. Whatever might happen ...” For the first time she looked down and swallowed as she thought of what the doctor had told her the other day. “... I am not alone.”

There was a long silence, during which she did not dare to look up at Edgar. When he spoke at last, it was in a musing tone. “What was that tune you were playing, as I was coming in?”

In some confusion, Jane replied, “Bach’s *Prelude in C*. One of my pupils—”

“You used to play it, didn’t you, when we were children. I’d come and listen at the window. Do you remember?”

She could not speak. Tears were leaking from her eyes, slipping down her chin.

“Jane.” Edgar’s voice sounded strangled, as though it were coming from somewhere deep within him. “I don’t want you to leave.”

Her heart was like a fragile little bird, fluttering in her chest. “Please don’t,” she whispered.

“You don’t wish me to say it?” Edgar’s voice was impossibly gentle. “But I must, Jane. I must ask your forgiveness.” The floor creaked as he took a step towards her.

Jane risked a glance up at him and saw that his eyes were shining with tears. “It is I who must ask your forgiveness,” she sobbed. “I deceived you ...”

“I thought so too, at first.” Tentatively, Edgar reached out and took her hand. “I told everyone I had been hoodwinked; I even started to believe it myself. But Jane ...” He drew her to him, even as she trembled, and his voice dropped to a whisper that touched her ears like a delicate caress. ‘I knew who you were, the moment you took off your veil that night. And I was the happiest creature in the world, until you ran away.” His arms tightened around her. “Tell me you will not run away again, Lady Payton.”

Jane did not know whether to laugh or cry. She seemed to be doing both, and as Edgar pulled back a little to look into her face, she saw that he was, too. Tenderly, he grasped her chin and tipped it up. But before he could do anything else, she threw her arms around his neck, stood on tiptoe, and kissed him herself. She did not break away, even as the door to the music room opened to admit the forgotten Lucy, who gasped and giggled at the sight of Miss Jane in the embrace of a stranger and ran to summon her friends.

My Dear Jane

Mr. Samuel Lloyd was sitting in his study when his wife burst in the door.

“Have you finished it yet?” she said eagerly.

“No, my dear,” he said, twirling his quill in his hand. “Not quite yet.”

“Good, because I have just thought of something else I wished to say to Jane. Now, I think she and Edgar should remove to Bath for her confinement: that is where all the fashionable people will be, after all, and I’m sure that the waters would do her good.”

“She will be staying here, close to her family,” Mr. Lloyd said firmly.

“Well, you know best, Mr. Lloyd, of course, but I rather think ...” His wife’s words faded out of his consciousness as he returned his gaze to the letter he had just written. It was only a page long; were such meagre sentiments really his daughter’s due? Sighing, Mr. Lloyd read over it line by line once more as his wife talked on.

My dear Jane,

I hope that you are enjoying yourself in the Lake District, and that it is not too cold. It is very dull here in Brunswick Square, now that all the excitement is over, and with you and Bella gone, your mother and I have been forced to make some changes to our routine. As such, I have given up reading and taken up the noble art of letter-writing. Your mother, of course, wishes me to explain her own negligence in that regard: she attributes it to that delightful scrupulousness that you and I both know has always formed her character: one letter from home, she tells me, is quite as much as any young lady on her honeymoon expects to receive.

But do not think we have been languishing here in your absence, as there have been a few little occurrences to keep us entertained. I am sure you

have already heard about Hubert Worthington finally proposing to Sophia Ellison—but did you know that your mother was single-handedly responsible for throwing them together? Indeed, she assures me that she knew of their affection for one another long before they even knew it themselves. You will be happy to learn that she has quite got over her disappointment at her youngest daughter's failure to catch either of the two most eligible bachelors in our neighborhood; though perhaps this Comte de Vibraye whom we are hearing so much about in Bella's letters from Paris has something to do with that.

Past this point, Mr. Lloyd had as of yet written no more. He looked up from the letter again.

“... of course, I always intended Edgar for Jane,” his wife was saying now. “You will recall me saying at the time of their engagement that I never thought him quite suited for Bella; it is a mercy that they did not make a match of it in the end. But young people can get so run away with their affections! Well...” She glanced up at the clock that hung over the mantelpiece. “I suppose I had better start my letter to the dear girl now, for the *Prince Regent* departs for Paris at eight.”

As the door of his study closed, leaving him in peace once more, Mr. Lloyd smiled, and seizing up his quill, wrote the remaining lines.

I look forward to your return to town, as, I am told, do Kitty, Sophia, Maria, and Hubert. Never forget, Jane, that whatever might happen in your future with Edgar, you will always have friends and family to help you. You have found love, one of the great gifts of life, but there is another gift that you have always had by your side: friendship.

I do not need to tell you to remain true, and good, and honest, just as I remain,

Your loving father,

Samuel Lloyd

Twin Trouble

Clean Regency Romance

A Bad Night at the Tables

With trepidation, Lord Oliver Maddox opened the door to the library where he knew he would find his twin sister ensconced behind the desk. The library was the one room in the Maddox manor where the twins knew that they would not be intruded upon by their parents. Neither Viscount Everdene nor his wife found the library to be of interest, which made it an opportune location for their offspring in which to meet when, as so often happened, they were obliged to conjure means to pay their parents' debts.

"How much this time?" Oliver asked.

His sister, Lady Olivia, glanced up from the scattering of paper upon the desk, and told him.

Lord Oliver winced. "Dash it, Liv, that's going to be deuced hard to pay. We may have to sell the sword."

The sword, a family memento of such legend that it was considered the ultimate heirloom, worth as much in funds as it was in renown, had been wielded by their earliest ancestor, Ragnulf of Normandy, who had accompanied the Conqueror in 1066.

"We cannot sell the sword," Olivia said in horror.

"I don't think Lady Anne will do it," Oliver said gloomily, referring to the portrait of Lady Anne Maddox, famous as one of Charles II's mistresses. "She's pretty enough, I reckon, and there's the story, but you know how Grandmamma is about the scandals, even when it's not from her side of the family."

"I can't see that it matters now," Olivia said logically. "King Charles has been dead for well over a century. It's hardly a scandal now. Besides, every other family in England likely had a female member who was his mistress. It's hardly unique and that will affect its value."

“True,” Oliver conceded. “But I’ve ranked the portraits by worth, you know, and Lady Anne is next in line.”

The twins started at the knock upon the door.

“It can’t be Mama or Papa,” Olivia said. “They won’t be up for hours yet. They came home very late last night. This morning,” she corrected herself. “Finch told me.”

“Come in,” Oliver directed.

It was Finch, the butler, a tall, rather funereal-looking gentleman of the utmost decorum, whose sepulchral demeanor disguised an abiding affection for the twins. “The Duke has sent a message, my lord,” he said to Lord Oliver. “The Countess has also sent one,” he informed Olivia. “They will be calling upon Lord and Lady Everdene this afternoon.”

“The Grands!” the twins repeated in unison.

“Yes,” Finch replied. To Finch’s view, it was no more than the irresponsible parents deserved, running through their fortune with reckless disregard for their children’s inheritance. He was relieved that finally, the august father of the light-hearted Lord Edmund and the regal mother of the merry Lady Clarissa intended to visit their adult children with, he was sure, a doom-laden reckoning to deliver. ‘The Grands’, as the twins referred to their grandparents, were upright and dignified members of the aristocracy who shunned the ton as readily as their son and daughter attended to it.

“Oh, Finch,” Lady Olivia said dolefully, “there will be a dreadful row. You know how Papa gets when Grandpapa lectures him. And Mama is sure to be bedridden with a headache when Grandmamma gives her a talking-to. Oliver, we simply must find a way to pay these debts.”

“If we don’t pawn the sword, I don’t see how—“

Both twins turned to look at Finch, who had uttered a gasp at the prospect of the sword—which, to Finch’s mind, was better considered The Sword, as if there were no other—being pawned.

“Dash it, Finch, I know it’s a dreadful prospect, but what can we do? Mama and Papa have really gotten into it this time. It’s more

than simply getting cheaper cuts of meat from the butcher.”

“I think, sir, that you had better allow your grandparents to decide that,” Finch said austerely. “I do not presume to advise, of course, but should word get out that The Sword is on the market, I daresay that the Duke will be in a very ill temper. The Countess, although it is not part of her ancestry, would agree with him in this, I think.”

“Finch is right,” Lady Olivia said finally as the twins considered their situation. She gave the butler a glance of gratitude. “You’re always right, Finch.”

“I should not presume to think so, milady,” Finch said. “Shall I have Cook prepare refreshments for them?”

“Yes, do, Finch. Something very sober and very English. Nothing French; you know how Grandpapa is about the French and their cuisine. Very simple fare. We must look as if we are being quite frugal in our habits. Even more frugal than usual,” she added, aware, as was Finch, that her penny-pinching over the household accounts put a great strain on their longsuffering cook.

“Very good, milady. I am sure that Cook will manage excellently.”

“She always does. Really, Finch, I don’t know what we would do without you and Cook and the staff. You’re trumps, you know.”

“Thank you, my lord. I shall convey your appreciation to Cook.”

“I suppose everyone knows about last night’s losses?”

“I do not see how they could possibly know,” Finch lied, well aware that all it took was a quick jaunt to one of the grooms in the neighboring stable, or a brief chat with a neighbor’s maid, to acquaint the staff with the news that, once again, Lord and Lady Everdene had lost at cards the night before.

Lord Oliver grinned tolerantly. “I suspect they know just how much was lost and how much Papa was in his cups when he lost,” he said.

“I should not presume to ask, my lord,” Finch replied stiffly.

“No, of course not. Well, Liv, if it’s not to be the sword, it’s going to have to be the nuptial knot.”

Finch, continuing on his way out of the library, heard the remark and his face hardened. It was a shame and a disgrace, he thought, and said as much to Cook when he met her downstairs in the kitchen, that the children should be so self-sacrificing when their parents were entirely the opposite. Cook agreed, but her mind was on the sort of meal that she would need to prepare which would pacify the Duke's demand for frugality while still maintaining the reputation of exquisite dining which was equally important to His Grace.

Unaware of the quandary of their servants, the twins were considering their limited options. Despite their youth, the twins had grown to the age of eighteen as the son and daughter of parents who reveled in the beau monde and were famous in London for their devil-may-care behavior. Years ago, lovely Clarissa Cortlandt and handsome Edmund Maddox had been forbidden to marry by their parents but, being deeply in love, they had eloped to Gretna Green. It had been a scandal, of course, but the deed was done, and by the following year, the twins had arrived. They were identical in looks and demeanor. Grandmamma noted proudly that they had inherited their dark gray eyes from their late grandfather, the Earl of Cordington; Grandpapa was equally pleased that they, like their late grandmother, the Duchess, had abundant blond hair that reminded him, he always told them, of the fields at Maddox at harvest time. It was as if, in their relentless desire to accommodate, they had been born determined to share the physical traits of both sides of the family.

The surviving grandparents were zealous in their efforts to attribute the traits of the twins to their deceased grandparents. Oliver, the Countess boasted, sat in his saddle with as much poise as his late grandfather, who was accounted quite a horseman in his youth. The Duke countered that Olivia danced with the grace of her grandmother, who had been so popular in the year of her coming out that all the hostesses clamored to host balls simply for the delight of watching her dance. The twins, amused by the competition between their surviving grandparents, paid little heed to the compliments which, they were convinced, owed more to the love that each grandparent still bore for their lost spouses than to any particular talents that they possessed. They generally had to soothe their parents' bruised feelings after listening to such praise.

Mama, after her mother had left, would complain to Olivia that she sometimes felt that Grandmamma had entirely forgotten her daughter's role in providing her with such remarkable grandchildren, and Papa, likewise, told Oliver that he wondered if the Duke had no regard at all for his son's contribution to his own progeny.

"It's going to be up to you, Liv, to set the thing off. You're making your debut this season, so you'll have to be the one to have the ton dancing attendance. I shall have to set my sights upon one of the other heiresses, although I don't know that I'll be allowed to marry at eighteen."

"I don't see what else we can do," Olivia conceded. "If we don't marry well, there's no telling what might happen to Mamma and Papa. The last time they got into such a state, I thought Grandpapa would have a fit. He vowed that he would not deliver them from any more of their peccadilloes."

"Yes," Oliver recalled, "and he threatened to cut Papa off without a shilling." Despite the severity of the sentence, Oliver grinned. "Not to be outdone, Grandmamma said they would have to let the London house and move into the dower cottage on her estate."

Olivia grinned as well at the memory, but then sobered. "Yes, but it didn't do any good. They simply went on playing and losing and going to balls and behaving as if there were no consequences. Grandpapa is going to be furious. And Grandmamma will have Mama cowering before her temper. I thought she would fling the Sevres vase the last time, she was so furious."

"Yes, well, she can't fling it this time," Oliver pointed out. "We sold it, and the seventh Viscount's portrait, to pay for the chestnuts that Papa had to have."

"Until he lost them in a bet made at White's window," Olivia sighed.

"There's nothing wrong with Grandpapa's grays," Oliver said. "They're perfectly fine horses. There was really no need for us to maintain our own carriage when Grandpapa has always allowed us to use his, but Papa was set on having his own."

“Yes, everything is perfectly fine, but if we don’t do something, there will be nothing left to sell.”

It had not occurred to either twin that marrying to provide a means of payment for their parents’ extravagance was not perhaps, the solution that they anticipated. But they had spent their youth as intermediaries between their parents’ follies and their grandparents’ disapproval and both would have been stunned to learn that it was not up to them to rescue the undisciplined Viscount and Viscountess from their misdeeds. Their grandparents, however, were very well aware of the fact.

The Grands Confer

As they were all in London for the holidays and the start of the season, the Duke offered to stop for the Countess in his carriage so that they could ride together. There was no sense, his note had read, in using two carriages. He did not say that the ducal carriage was the more impressive of the two, but the Countess did not demur. Her matched bays were much more spirited and noble in appearance than his dowdy grays, but she was of course too well-mannered to point this out. The late Earl had been a superior judge of horseflesh and although it had been a decade since his death, his widow maintained his standards as a tribute to his taste.

“Well, Madam, it would seem that they’ve surpassed themselves this time,” the Duke said to the Countess after his groom had gone to the door to escort her to the carriage.

“So I heard,” the Countess replied, her lips set in a thin line of disapproval. She was dressed for maternal war, in a sober gray bombazine gown which, despite its severity of line, showed up well against her snowy white hair. Her hat, a rather magnificent concoction of lace and plumes—the Countess had been heard to confess that hats were her sole weakness—made up for the sobriety of her frock. As she nodded her head emphatically, the Duke wondered if the plumes would be able to manage the roof of the carriage without breaking. “I confess, Your Grace, that I am grievously disappointed in Clarissa.”

“Edmund has not been a source of pride for me, milady,” the Duke agreed.

“We tried to keep them apart when they first met,” the Countess recalled. “My late husband said they were too much alike and they would nurture one another’s follies like garden soil and horse manure. My husband was a plain-spoken man.”

The Duke barked out a laugh at the comment. “I remember him,”

the Duke said. "I wholeheartedly agree. Plain speaking is what this nation is founded upon. All of this fol-de-rol and fritter; I blame it on the French."

"Perhaps the war will change that," the Countess suggested brightly. "Now that Wellington has sent Boney to Elba, I am sure that our English ways will triumph once again. But it may not happen in time to reform my daughter or your son," she added pragmatically.

"No, but there's some comfort in the twins. They seem to be as sensible as their parents are feckless."

"The dear twins. I own, Your Grace, that if it were not for their noble characters and their excellent manners, I should be quite in despair. I have great hopes for both of them."

"As well you should, so long as their parents do not ruin their chances. You heard how much they lost at the tables last night. Oliver has been selling things. He believes I don't notice, but of course I notice; the London house used to be mine until I, most unwisely, settled it upon Edmund when he married. I know what was there. Oliver is doing it to make good on his father's debts of honor, but if he keeps it up, there will be nothing left of the heirlooms and treasures."

"He's a good boy and very loyal," the Countess said, "but I am in agreement. The twins must not be put to the point of having to sacrifice their inheritance merely so that their parents may continue to be wastrels. My late husband was mindful of our daughter's frivolous nature and in his will, he made it clear that Clarissa was not to receive her full portion as long as I am alive. But I shall not live forever and I despair at the thought of what will happen when I am gone and Clarissa has free rein."

"Nonsense, you're good for years yet!" the Duke declared. "You've kept yourself well."

"Thank you, Your Grace," the Countess replied with dignity. "But we are all mortal. Even though you are clearly still as vigorous as you were when the twins were born, I am sure that you, as I am, are conscious of time's encroachment."

"You're kind to say so, Madam," the Duke said, fixing her with a keen blue gaze. She was a pretty woman, not painted up like some older women chose to be. Fine skin, too, still smooth over a delicate bone structure that gave her a youthful look. Bone structure was everything, Lucille used to tell him. She was right. Well, wasn't she right about most things? A day didn't go by that he didn't think of something that she'd said. Five years since her passing and he mourned her still.

There was a brief silence as the grandparents considered their situation. The Duke spoke first. "I feel, Madam, that rather severe consequences must result if the twins are to prosper. I wonder if I may count upon your assistance in this enterprise?"

"Of course, your Grace; you may count on me to support you in any endeavor which ensures good fortune for the twins. Olivia will be coming out this season and nothing must interfere with her prowess. She is a beautiful girl and with her breeding, I am confident that she will encounter no obstacle in entertaining numerous suitors who are worthy of her. She is a sensible girl, unlikely to have her head turned by one of these wastrels who seem to do nothing but drink and gamble. Of course she must marry well, but I wish her to marry honorably."

"We are in accord, Madam," the Duke nodded, his posture ramrod straight and his gaze straightforward as he considered the marital fate of his beloved granddaughter. "Oliver is too young to marry, but he will certainly have his share of attention during the season, and who is to say what might transpire for the future? I do not wish for him to fall into that lamentable custom that seems to have afflicted our finest families, where aristocrats with empty purses are obliged to marry the wealthy daughters of men in trade."

"Certainly not!" the Countess affirmed, shuddering at the thought that a Cordington, among the noblest of England's ruling families, should marry someone who was so ill-bred as to earn his living, however lucrative the earning should be. "He must marry well, and he should be confident of doing so, given his expectations," she said, with a nod toward the Duke, who had the superior title which, eventually, his grandson would inherit. "The families must retain their bloodlines," she said. The late Earl had been emphatic on the subject of bloodlines, whether discussing his mares, who came from

prizewinning stock, or his ancestry.

"I believe that the twins will be ruled by us in this," the Duke said. "But we must present a united front to our children."

"Quite right, your Grace. Have you a plan?"

"I have, but I warn you, it is severe. Edmund will be prostrate."

"Will you not divulge it to me? I shall better defend it if I know it in advance."

"Of course, Madam. They must return to the country. You and I shall oversee Olivia's coming out; I defer, of course, to your expertise in such a matter. Would you consent to move into the London house? Your chaperonage would be above reproach; I do not believe there is a woman more highly regarded in London than yourself. You would not be duped by the swells, as I believe they are known, and should Olivia find herself swayed by the dubious attractions of a young man of superficial charm but no substance, you would be able to divest him of his hopes in appropriate fashion. I realize that it is an imposition to ask you to leave the comfort of your own house in London for one which is, although familiar to you, not your own, but perhaps you agree with me that Olivia's position must be strengthened. If our children are sent back to the country, and Olivia and Oliver were to move in with you or with me, the perception would be that the London mansion had to be mortgaged due to financial distress."

The Countess considered this. She was quite fond of her London home which, although not ostentatious, was elegant and fashionable, located of course, in Mayfair and convenient to the members of her social circle. Her servants were familiar with her tastes and obeyed her without question. Still, the Duke's proposal made sense. Moving into the London house, which had been owned by the Maddox family since before the Hanovers took the throne, would be a sensible option.

"Also," the Duke added, "you would be able to make certain that no more possessions are to be pawned or sold off to pay the debts that Edmund and Clarissa have incurred."

"If they retire to the country," the Countess said thoughtfully, "they

should have relatively little occasion to incur debt.”

“I shall visit frequently,” the Duke told her, “to ensure that is the case.”

The Countess bestowed upon the Duke a winning smile, one which summoned up her still-splendid cheekbones and set her dark green eyes a-sparkle. “Your Grace,” she declared, “I think that you have come up with the very solution to our dilemma.”

The Viscount and Viscountess React

Lady Clarissa, a cool cloth upon her forehead, was perched in her bed, her shoulders resting against her pillows. Her lace bed jacket and perfect coiffure indicated that she had been awake long enough for her maid to dress her, not for getting up, but for remaining abed, a situation required when the Viscountess learned that her mother was visiting that afternoon.

“Olivia, darling, you must tell your Grandmamma that I am unwell and regret that I am unable to come downstairs.”

Olivia studied her mother with tolerant affection. “Mama, I fear that Grandmamma will insist. The note was rather specific. She and Grandpapa are coming to see you and Papa.”

Lady Clarissa moaned again. “Pray, Olivia, do not remind me. I simply am in no condition to face my mother when she is in one of her dreadful imperial humors. She is so very fond of you; she will attend to your words if you present my regrets.”

“Mama,” Olivia said firmly, “it will not do to avoid Grandmamma.”

“I am not avoiding her!” Lady Clarissa wailed. “I am quite unwell; I believe there is an ague about. Lord Huxley was sniffing while we played last night and I do not doubt that he has infected us all with whatever malady he is suffering from.”

“You know that Grandmamma is not likely to be put off by an ague.”

“She is so insufferably healthy,” her mother observed crossly. “She is never sympathetic to anyone’s ill health.” Lady Clarissa glowered, but then brightened.

“I know! Olivia, my dear, you must tell her that the doctor says that

I must stay quarantined in my room until the fever has passed, lest I infect someone. That will do.”

“It will not do, Mama. You have not seen the doctor and Grandmamma will find that out before tea time. You know that she will want to know more about this mysterious illness of yours.”

“She’s so very tiresome,” Lady Clarissa complained, tossing off the bedlinens as she surrendered to the inevitable. “But I shall tell Gower to dress me quite drably, so that I look as if I ought to be in bed.”

“Mama,” Olivia pointed out fondly, “you are always beautiful and brimming with health. Nothing that Gower can do will douse your looks.”

“Dear Olivia, you are such a comfort to me,” Lady Clarissa said, examining her reflection in her full-length mirror as she passed it, and reassured that her image showed her to be as lovely as ever. It would have been better had she been slightly more wan, but perhaps Gower could do something to make her cheeks appear just a tad pinker than they ought to be if she were in health . . . Gower was a sorceress with carefully applied cosmetics, so skillful that no one in London guessed that the Viscountess of Everdene even used paint. But at thirty-seven, Lady Clarissa was determined to stave off every intimation of matronly age. Strands of hair which failed to conform to the auburn shade of her tresses were ruthlessly plucked from her scalp. She examined her face daily for signs of lines or wrinkles which, so far, had not invaded her porcelain complexion.

She was not, to be sure, the belle she had been at seventeen when darling Edmund had captured her heart, but in all their years of marriage, he had never once shown interest in another woman. Nor had he, as so many men of their class did, chosen a mistress. He had told her that there was not a woman in Europe who could match her for looks and charm and for her part, Lady Clarissa had never taken a lover as so many others in her circle had done. She was as besotted with darling Edmund as she had been when he first asked her to dance at Lady Claridge’s ball and could not conceive of ever being otherwise. Edmund was a darling, such fun, such a perfect husband, so indulgent and eager to see her happy.

She wished that Mama would be less censorious and more appreciative of their happy union, but the Countess was forever finding fault with her daughter and son-in-law's choices of entertainment, or their friends, or their parties. It seemed as though nothing pleased her. And now she intended to storm into her daughter's home as if she were justified in doing so, just to criticize Clarissa for losing at cards, when there were others at the rout last night who had lost just as much. Well, perhaps not just as much, but very nearly.

"Mama," Olivia said tentatively, feeling obligated to at least broach the subject of last night's gambling losses to prepare her mother for the imminent grilling from the Countess which was likely to be distinctly more aggressive. "Perhaps you and Papa are not lucky at cards."

Lady Clarissa sat in front of her vanity, perusing her reflection closely in the mirror. "Darling, your father and I were saying that very thing last night."

"You were?" Olivia asked hopefully. Perhaps, if her parents intended to reform, there would be no need for the meeting with the grandparents to be as exacting as it was likely to be otherwise.

Lady Clarissa nodded vigorously, taking care to lift up her chin fully from her neck with each nod so that she could preserve the tautness of her skin. "I told your father that we are simply not meant to win at loo. I pointed out the times that we have lost. I believe I convinced him."

Could it be this simple? "Then you do not intend to continue to play?"

"Indeed, no. We are going to avoid loo entirely," Lady Clarissa said.

"Mama, this is very good news," Olivia told her. "I believe that when Grandmamma hears this, she will not be so cross."

"Do you think so?" Lady Clarissa asked, pleased. "She's never happy with me, but it would be quite fun to have her even a little less vexed. Do you really think that our decision will content her?"

"I do indeed, Mama. Knowing that you and Papa intend to give up gambling and—":

"Oh, darling Olivia, one cannot give up gambling in the ton," Lady Clarissa said. "No, no. What I mean is that we are giving up loo. We're going to play faro exclusively."

Olivia's heart sank. "But Mama, you lose at faro."

"But not as much, darling Olivia," Lady Clarissa replied triumphantly. "Our losses were not nearly as great."

"Mama," Olivia said, clearly troubled, "Oliver had to sell the portrait of Duchess Berthe to pay for those losses."

"I never liked that portrait and neither did your father," Lady Clarissa said. "She was so very puritanical. I always felt as if she were looking disapprovingly at me. I cannot think why she was married at all. I believe she brought no money into the family fortune and this was at a time, you recall, when the harvests had been very bad."

"I suppose the Duke loved her, then," Olivia said.

"I'm very glad that her looks didn't pass through the generations," Lady Clarissa said. "That chin of hers was quite unfeminine. So broad. No, I don't think we miss that portrait at all. Darling, please summon Gower. If I am to be ready for Mama, I must look just right."

Olivia left her mother's bedroom and relayed her instructions to her lady's maid. Gower was sympathetic to Lady Olivia's plight but her first loyalty was to Lady Clarissa and she hurried off to her mistress immediately.

Olivia walked disconsolately down the staircase. Finch, crossing the room, saw her and paused. She and her brother deserved better, he thought.

"My lady," he said.

Olivia looked up. "Yes, Finch?"

"Cook is preparing stew for lunch. She thought that might suit?"

"Yes, I think that will do very well. Grandpapa will approve."

"Yes, milady. Cook felt that hearty but simple fare would do well

for a midday meal and would not offend His Grace. She has prepared an apple tart, as well; the Countess is very fond of apple tart, as I recall.”

“Yes, she is.”

“My lady,” Finch said gently, “you seem troubled. I am sure that your grandparents will be able to put things to rights.”

Olivia tried to smile. Finch was such a dear in his efforts to cheer her up. “I am sure of it,” she agreed. “But their concept of what putting to rights entails is unlikely to match that of my parents.”

“Perhaps not,” Finch agreed. “But perhaps it is a matter for the adults to settle.”

“I daresay you are correct,” Olivia told him. “I must learn to take your advice.”

“I would not presume to give your ladyship advice,” he answered her. “Merely to express my wishes that this matter will soon be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction.”

It was all very well to say so, Olivia thought as she made her way to the library. But satisfaction for her parents meant continuing to gamble because it was what the members of the beau monde did for their entertainment. Satisfaction for her grandparents meant something else again and it did not include substituting faro for loo.

The Countess Presents Her Case

“You cannot be so cruel as to deny me my daughter!” Lady Clarissa wailed at her mother. “You cannot hate me so much that you would banish me to the country while my daughter makes her debut and has her season.”

“I do not hate you at all, Clarissa,” the Countess said, her voice even. “I am merely presenting you with the options which your own behavior has left us. Olivia’s season cannot be compromised by the outlandish behavior of her parents, therefore, her parents must not remain in London while she makes her debut. Oliver will of course remain here; he is her brother and while he is too young to wed, he will benefit from being part of the season as well. He will meet others of his class and they will have sisters. He should have gone off to Oxford before this; he will do so in the coming year. The Duke and I have discussed this at length and we agree that the twins must be our priority.”

“Of course the twins must be our priority,” Lady Clarissa said, tears streaming down her face. “Edmund and I have created a place for them in society that guarantees their position. We know all the fashionable people. Do you not wish for Olivia to have the most eligible gentlemen in the ton angling for dances at balls? Edmund and I are intimate friends with the people who are sought after for all of the most exclusive parties. Olivia and Oliver too will be welcome because Edmund and I are friends of these people.”

“Debtors, wastrels, gamblers and drunkards,” the Countess said as if she were delivering a sentence. “I should hardly call these people the sort who will be welcome as suitors for my granddaughter.”

“It is not merely a matter of marrying, Mama,” Lady Clarissa argued. “One must present one’s self with a certain flair, you know.”

“Olivia is a beautiful child with many accomplishments,” the

Countess replied.

“Yes, certainly, but she has not been out. She must not be seen to be rustic, you know. She must flirt and play the coquette. Men have fallen in love with the manner in which a young woman uses her fan, you know.”

“And what sort of a husband would that be, pray tell?”

“Really, Mama, you have been out of society for too long and you are

unacquainted with the ways of the beau monde.”

“I am well acquainted with the ways of the beau monde, Clarissa,” the Countess replied in an acerbic tone. “I am acquainted with the manner in which members of the beau monde run through money as if it were water drawn from a well and I am aware that household possessions are often sold in order for these titled idlers to continue to indulge themselves at the expense of their children’s inheritance. Do not, pray, tell me that I am unacquainted with the ways of the beau monde.”

Clarissa’s luminous green eyes filled with more tears. “Mama, you are unspeakably cruel to me. You have been so ever since Edmund and I were wed and it is beyond hope that you will ever be otherwise. I suppose you intend to turn my own children against me!”

“I would never do that, and Oliver and Olivia would never countenance such a thing from me. Do not speak foolishly, Clarissa. The Duke and I are forced to intervene, not because we choose to but because, if we do not, the twins will be left with nothing. They deserve the opportunity to marry well and I will not see my only granddaughter married off to one of those fops of the ton who can do nothing but wager, race their horses, and drink. “

“Of course not Mama; do you think I wish my only daughter to endure such a marriage? I want her to marry for love, as I did.”

The Countess gave a most unladylike snort of disdain. “Love comes after marriage.”

“It should not do so,” Clarissa insisted.

"This modern way of looking at marriage as if it were a stage play is absurd."

"Did you not love Papa?" her daughter challenged her.

The two women, mother and daughter, looked very much alike. The Countess had once had hair as auburn as her daughter's tresses, and her green eyes were mirrored in her daughter's gaze. But Clarissa was, and ever had been, minxish and beguiling, able to win her father with a plea. The Countess briefly reflected that she was quite glad that Olivia looked quite unlike her mother and her grandmother, with her steady gray eyes and splendid pale gilt hair.

"I loved him, yes. After we were wed. But do not think to distract me, Clarissa. You will cease these libertine entertainments as we plan for Olivia's debut. You will be present for the first ball. And then you and Edmund will return to the country. The Duke will not have it otherwise. You may wail and shriek all you wish, but if you behave like a willful child you will not even be granted the first ball."

"Surely you will permit me to take her to the shops to order her wardrobe," Clarissa said. "I do not believe that her grandfather will be so tight-fisted that he will not wish her to be well turned out."

"You and I will both accompany her," the Countess said. "I trust that I may keep a close eye on the expenses without sending my granddaughter to the Season dressed inappropriately."

"It will be very expensive," Clarissa said cunningly.

"You should have thought of that before you wagered her wardrobe money away at a turn of the cards," the Countess replied. "If the Duke chooses to withhold approval due to cost, you have only yourself to blame. I have some money put aside for Olivia's coming out," the Countess said carefully. In truth, she had quite a bit of money put aside for Olivia's coming out, but it would not do to let Clarissa feel that she had a free hand with the purse strings. "We shall take her to the shops and we shall see that she is well outfitted. I think we shall give a New Year's ball. She must be presented to the Queen when the drawing room dates are available, but we shall start the year off with a ball. Then you and Edmund must return to the country."

“Mama, the season is barely underway until May,” Clarissa argued. “You would deprive me of the joy of seeing my daughter as she becomes a woman!”

The Countess was not deterred by her daughter’s glare. The two women sat genteelly on the Hepplewhite sofa in the morning room, their skirts falling gracefully upon the pale pink floral upholstery. Their posture was unfailingly straight, their fingers poised around their teacups. True, Clarissa looked to be a bit pale, but the Countess’ sharp eye did not detect signs of illness. An early riser herself, she attributed her daughter’s lack of color to the lateness of the nights she kept. As Olivia had pointed out, her mother was too vivacious to appear as if she were pining from a wasting disease.

But, reluctant though she was to admit it, the Countess recognized that there was an element of truth in her daughter’s assessment of Olivia’s matrimonial allure. She was beautiful, kind, well-connected and well-dowered. She would be a prize for any man. But the men of the marriage mart that was the London season longed to be enticed by an exotic female who captured their fancy. Men were fools, the Countess thought. Olivia was more like her grandmother, sensible and pragmatic, than she was like her merry, coquettish mother. Perhaps, the Countess considered, it would be necessary for Clarissa to give her daughter cues in the art of feminine wiles, so that she would attract the most marriageable of bachelors in her first season.

It was imperative to marry Olivia off before her parents could do any more damage to the family fortune or to their children’s chances. One day, Clarissa and Edmund would inherit everything and then, there was no telling what would be left of the inheritance and the heritage. No, marriage was the only way to keep Olivia from falling victim to her parents’ profligate habits.

Then it would be time, once Olivia was married and started on the business of children, to concentrate on Oliver’s future. He must be getting off to Oxford next year, and a tour of Europe, now that the British had driven Bonaparte out and freed the Continent from the plague of French impertinence. Perhaps Oliver might think of a military career; the Maddoxes ran to soldiers, but generally in the second sons, and of course, the Duke and his frail wife had not been blessed.

It would be very well for Oliver to learn his future role; he would be the Duke one day, although it was the earnest prayer of the Countess that that day would not arrive too soon. Edmund as the Duke was not an encouraging prospect. Really, she wondered, how had she and the Duke both been given such exasperating children?

The Twins Consider Their Fate

Oliver gave his sister a sympathetic glance. "I am very glad I'm not a female," he said. "I should muck it up, I'm quite sure. Walking backwards from the Queen, with those feathers on your head . . . really, Liv, I don't know how you managed!"

The dreaded presentation was over, as the Queen had scheduled a drawing room just before the Christmas holidays. The winter had been a mad swirl of shopping trips and new clothes, but even though the purchases were sanctioned by her grandmother, Olivia felt that the expenses were much too outrageous. Mama, seeming to forget that after the ball, she would be banished to the country, had thrown herself into the shopping with great delight, insisting that a young lady needed so many things. For instance, it was necessary, her mother claimed, for Olivia to own multiple pairs of gloves because gentleman's hands were often sweaty. Olivia, who had never paid much mind to her wardrobe, was now the recipient of an array of clothing which completely outfitted her from bonnet to boot.

"I'm not sure either," Olivia confessed. She had pleaded a headache in order to get out of the afternoon calls, an enterprise which entertained her mother and grandmother much more than it did Olivia. Now, she and Oliver were comfortably perched upon the sofa in the library, warding off the winter cold with the comfort of the fire and cups of hot chocolate. "I confess, Oliver, that I'm not quite sure what it will be like to have Grandmamma in charge once Mama and Papa return to the country."

"Grandpapa has been taking me to his clubs," Oliver sighed. "He says I must find the one that's right for me. But his clubs seem very stodgy, and Papa's seem a bit rakish. I don't think there is a club for me. I'm going to disappoint them both, I fear."

"Nonsense," his sister told him. "You could never disappoint them."

"I fear that I already have," Oliver confessed. "I don't particularly like hunting, as you know—my sympathy is for the fox rather than the hounds—and I've no interest in cards."

"I think you're capital just as you are!" Olivia told him. "It's the fault of the clubs, not of you."

"I don't even care all that much for London," he admitted. "I'd rather be the one going home instead of Mama and Papa."

"The only reason we come to London is so that we may keep Mama and Papa out of mischief," Olivia nodded. "Now they are being sent home after the ball and we must stay here. And I must marry well."

The twins were silent, recalling how certain they had been that marriage was the way to rescue their parents from improvidence. The intervention of their grandparents had not moved marriage from the family agenda, but the reality of matrimony had suddenly become inescapable. Olivia attempted to seem enthusiastic about the upcoming social calendar in which she would play a part. She tried to show exuberance with her rather dazzling new wardrobe, knowing how much it meant to both Mama and Grandmamma. But, in truth, she was not at all interested in the latest fashions, or of being presented to the Queen, or of pleasing the patronesses of Almack's, or, most daunting, of catching the eye of an eligible young man of means who would marry her.

"Mama keeps telling me to look lively," Olivia said, "and Grandmamma is always giving me instructions on how I must sit and what I must say. Both of them came out and yet they tell me completely opposite things! I do not know how I shall keep it all straight and I'm quite sure that I shall be proclaimed an antidote at the ball. You will be the only one who wants to dance with me."

"You dance very well, Liv, you always have done so. I'm the one with the feet that never quite match the music."

"That's with our dancing instructor, not with real partners," she disagreed. "How on earth shall I remember the steps, carry on a conversation with a man who is a complete stranger, and obey all the rules?"

"There are rules for us, too, you know," Oliver pointed out.

"Yes, but you won't be ruined if you break them."

"Perhaps not, but I could very well end up having to marry a girl merely because I held her hand too long!"

Olivia burst into laughter. "Oh, Oliver, that's not so."

"Very nearly," Oliver replied. "I shall be so intent on following these deuced complicated rules that I shan't think of anything else. I vow that I might find refuge in the card room if only to escape the rigors of the dancing."

"How did we get into this muddle?"

"Mama and Papa," her brother reminded her.

"Oh, yes . . . they managed all right. Marrying, I mean. I think they are still as much in love now as when they eloped to Gretna Green."

"Yes," Oliver agreed. "I believe they are. But don't elope, Liv, it'll be such a trial. I shall have to chase after you, you know, and rescue you from scandal."

Olivia's lips quirked in amusement. "Only to spare you, brother," she said, striving to maintain a grave expression, "I promise not to run to Gretna Green with my intended."

"Just so," Oliver grinned. "See that you don't."

The twins, owing to their natures and the closeness of their bond, were able to weather the bustle of activity that was required when preparing for a private ball. The event was eagerly anticipated as the first ball of the New Year and the circle of friends for the grandparents and for the parents, each with perhaps different expectations, had responded to the invitations promptly, as had the mothers of young women who would be coming out that year.

Because she had already been presented to the Queen, Olivia was recognized to have achieved a cachet lacking in some of the other guests, and her grandmother agreed with her mother that it would be fitting for Olivia, partnered by Oliver, to lead in the first dance. Such a pairing would not obstruct Olivia's success in attracting a suitable partner, the ladies agreed, and would, as well, make an

impressive appearance. The Vicountess dismissed the wish of the Countess to open the dancing with the minuet.

“No one does, anymore, Mama,” Clarissa said. “It takes too long. It may have gone over in the past, but not anymore. Let us open with a quadrille.”

Her mother, slightly miffed at the suggestion that the minuet represented an out-of-date dance, turned to Olivia. “Child, what do you think?”

Oliver was adept at the quadrille. “Yes, please, I think that will do very well,” Olivia agreed.

Clarissa beamed. “Excellent. Everything shall be splendid.”

“There will be no waltzes,” the Countess said. “They are indecent.”

Clarissa did not demur, having won her battle over the minuet. In any case, she knew that, while her set might not have reservations regarding the scandalous waltz, her mother’s set certainly would, and the mothers of the other young girls would more than likely have objected as well. She did not want Olivia’s first ball to be marked by even a whisper of reproach; everything must be perfect.

Her mother and grandmother were delighted at the list of names of those who would be in attendance. Olivia tried not to pay too much attention as they concocted scenarios over which young gentleman was the most impressive as a potential suitor, but she confided to Oliver, when the duo went for their morning ride, that she would be relieved when it was ended.

“I know that I must go to other balls this season,” she admitted as their horses trotted along, side by side, while the twins enjoyed the brisk morning air of a winter day with sunshine. “But this one is a trial. Mama and Grandmamma seem to be enjoying it so much that I know I am dreadful for feeling otherwise.”

“Not so, Liv. It’s not your fancy, that’s all. Dancing is one thing when everyone is being looked at, but to be the main object of attention, well, I feel the same. We’ll get through the quadrille and then you’ll be sought after and I’ll do my duty and dance with the others and then, first thing we know, we’ll have danced and dined and danced again and it will be time for everyone to go to their

own homes and leave us in ours. We know the people who are coming, at least most of them, and they know us. I daresay they're all feeling a bit jittery, at least the girls, about the start of the season."

"I don't really know them, though, particularly the gentlemen. Not as a potential husband."

"Don't think of it that way," Oliver advised. "Think of them as partners for dining or dancing for the night. You'll go mad if you consider the ball as if it were entirely pre-nuptial, and I'll go mad right alongside of you. One dance, one course, one episode of meaningless chatter. That's the way to do it."

"Oliver, if you weren't my twin, you would be my very best friend," Olivia said warmly.

"Same here, Liv. We'll get through this together. In the meantime, you may have noticed that Mama and Grandmamma, and Papa and Grandpapa, are getting along as if there's never been a row at all. It seems that they agree on nothing so well as they do on settling our futures."

The Night of the Ball

Both the Viscountess and the Countess were in accord when Olivia emerged into view after Gower's ministrations. "My darling girl!" Clarissa said feelingly. "You are exquisite!"

Her grandmother, seeking for anything that could possibly diminish her granddaughter's effect, walked around Olivia. She scanned her dress, a marvelous pale pink concoction of crepe and white satin with a border of tulle adorned with stitched roses; studied her hair, pulled back into a chignon at the base of her neck, with a profusion of curls framing her face; considered her jewels, which came from the assorted collections of her mother and grandmother, and were tastefully arranged around her neck and wrist, with the late Duchess' diamond earrings dangling from her ears.

"Perfection," the Countess pronounced. "Perfection."

Olivia smiled. If Grandmamma said it, then it was so. Imbued with a flicker of confidence that perhaps she would not muck it up, Olivia joined the ladies as they made their way to the ballroom.

Clarissa had chosen the musicians and the Duke, who was very fond of music, acknowledged to his son that they seemed to be first rate as they watched the twins lead the first dance. Edmund's heart swelled with pride as Oliver and Olivia, comfortable in the partnering, laughed and stepped their way with skill. Others, watching, could be heard to comment upon the appearance of the twins; one mother's voice said, audibly. "Why, they're both quite handsome, are they not?" as if it were deemed unlikely that twins could equally share attractive features.

"You must take care that some swell doesn't steal Olivia's heart," the Duke advised his son after the dance ended and both men noticed a male advance heading in Olivia's direction to claim her for the next one.

"She's very sensible," the Viscount replied. "I should be astonished if she chose unwisely."

"If she chose?" the Duke repeated incredulously. "It is for parents to choose."

"I should never deny Livvie her heart," Edmund said firmly. At the age of forty, he was still, to his wife the handsomest man in any room. Other ladies had noticed that he remained lean and firm of muscle and that his brown hair, lightly sprinkled with white, still grew in abundance upon his head. But he noticed none of them. Clarissa was his love and always would be.

"What if she should choose a bounder?" the Duke challenged him.

"She will not," Edmund replied confidently. "I told you, she is sensible. In any case, she would listen to Oliver's advice before anyone's and Oliver too, is sensible. He would not refrain from voicing his views should she somehow fall for the charms of a scoundrel. But she will not. And for his part, Oliver respects his sister's guidance above all others. He will attend to what she says, you may be sure of it."

Unaware that his father was discussing his character, Oliver, who was simply relieved that he had comported himself in the opening dance with no noticeable flaws, was doing his manly part in asking other girls to dance. When he returned the daughter of the Earl of Lincoln to her mother, she was immediately invited to the next dance by an elegant young gentleman with an elaborate cravat. She accepted eagerly.

"I wonder he does not suffocate," Oliver said in astonishment at the sartorial extravagance of neckcloth.

He heard a woman's laugh. Startled, he saw a young lady who appeared to find his comment amusing. She was standing by the mother of the girl he had just partnered, but the Countess of Lincoln was engaged in conversation with other ladies around her.

"Beg pardon," Oliver said immediately. "I ought not to have said that."

"It was the very thing I was thinking," the young woman said. "I doubt that he can comfortably move his head from side to side. See,

as he converses with my cousin, his head does not move.”

Oliver watched and saw the truth of the young woman’s words.
“You are correct, Miss . . . “

“Abigail Denning,” she replied.

“Oliver Maddox,” he answered. “Would you care to dance the next one?”

“I would,” she said promptly.

She was simply dressed, Oliver noticed, but that was too her credit, as he felt that the less fabric and train of a girl’s dress, the less there was for him to step on. Her dark brown hair was simply fashioned, with ringlets circling her face. Only a plain cameo necklace decorated her neck, and she wore no other jewelry. Her dark brown eyes, lively with humor and intelligence, were far more attractive than any gem could have been, Oliver thought.

“Excellent,” he answered. “I warn you that I shall probably step on your toes and leave you wishing the dance would end soon.”

She laughed “But at least, when we converse, you will be able to meet my eyes without being strangled by your cravat,” she replied.

The Duke observed the couple when they joined the throng for the next dance. “Who’s that girl?” he asked.

The Viscount’s eyes were on his daughter, who was dancing with the Marquis of Dorchester, a young man who had recently come into his title. He was said to be very accomplished in the talents of the ton: he rode well, danced well, gambled well, held his drink well. Other than that, the Viscount knew little about him.

“What girl?”

“The one dancing with Oliver. I don’t recognize her.”

Edmund found his son. “She’s a distant cousin of the Earl of Lincoln’s family, I believe. An orphan. No money, no family; I believe she’s a sort of companion to the daughter. Why?”

“Oliver seems to be enjoying the dance, that’s why. He has looked quite pained through every other dance except the one with Olivia,

that's why."

"Enjoying a dance isn't the same as a proposal of marriage, Papa," Edmund reminded his father. "Besides, Oliver is too young to be thinking of marriage. It's Olivia who is on display for a husband."

"The Marquis seems to be attentive," the Duke noticed.

"He's dancing with the prettiest girl on the dance floor," Edmund said proudly.

"Of course he's attentive. He knows that if he is not, there are a dozen bachelors who will make up for his deficiency."

It was the Marquis who escorted Olivia to the dining room. Her family, even as they conducted themselves with the attentiveness required of hosts, were not displeased that the young man acquitted himself well as he poured Olivia's wine and, throughout the meal, engaged in conversation with her.

Olivia was unused to such concentrated attention but the Marquis was a deft conversationalist, apologizing for not having known who she was before tonight. "I was traveling," he said with a charming smile. "I have been enjoying the warmth of Italy and as a result, our cold English winters feel even more frigid."

"Italy would be lovely," she replied.

"An Italian honeymoon would be just the thing," he agreed, smiling meaningfully.

"Did you see any of the famous artwork?" she asked.

"Some, I suppose," he shrugged. "It's all over the place, one scarcely knows if it was by Leonardo or by some local peasant. I can vouch for the quality of Italian wines."

"And the opera?" she asked. "Did you enjoy the opera?"

"I attended the opera," he replied. "As to enjoying it . . . perhaps it sounds better if one knows Italian. You are fond of opera?"

"Very fond, yes," she said. "My grandparents are fond of it as well and they take us often. My brother would share your views, however."

"Ah, then, I must prevail upon your brother to speak on my behalf so that you do not think me uncultured."

"I should never think that," she disagreed. "My mother does not like opera either."

"Your mother and my mother are friends, I believe," the Marquis said.

"Are they?"

"Very good friends. They share a fondness for loo."

"Oh."

"You do not share that fondness?"

"No, I-I do not play."

"Do not play? Perhaps you have never been taught how? I should be glad to teach you."

"I fear that I would only lose," Olivia replied awkwardly.

"But perhaps there are stakes of play for which losing is not something to be feared," he said, bending his head low as he spoke. "Perhaps, if one stakes one's heart and loses, one actually wins. Is that not possible?"

"I could not say," she answered, trying to look away. His dark blue eyes held hers as if she were prey. Perhaps she did not want to escape. Was that what it meant to attract a husband, to feel as if one were captive against one's will? He was very handsome and although she knew little of men's fashions because Oliver was oblivious to the latest trends, she realized that he was clearly a man of style. She had never experienced this feeling before and she was not sure what it meant. It was not something she could ask of Oliver. She instinctively knew that he would not like the Marquis.

Where was Oliver, she wondered. Then she spotted him, on the other side of the table, engrossed in conversation with a pretty girl who seemed able to carry on discourse with aplomb. Oliver was laughing at something she had said.

How did one inspire one's dinner partner to laugh, Olivia wondered

miserably. The prospect of a succession of evenings such as this one, captured in conversation that was unfamiliar to her, did not give her reason to anticipate the rest of the season.

But is it Love?

Olivia's grandmother and mother were gratified. Calling cards from the ball had been received in abundance. When the Duke showed up for lunch, he was pleased to see that Cook, a resourceful woman, had served the food that had been left over from last night's affair. He paid less attention to the names of the gentlemen who had left their cards.

"The Marquis!" Clarissa said happily, holding up the card. "Livvie, you have made a conquest."

Olivia took a spoonful of the white soup that Cook had reheated for their lunch. It was excellent soup. She was not hungry for any of the other delicacies that were on the table.

"Livvie, are you not pleased?" Clarissa asked. "The Marquis of Dorchester wishes permission to call upon you."

"I saw him today at my club," Edmund said. "He seems quite taken with you."

"He danced two dances," Grandmamma recalled, but her tone did not indicate whether she was pleased or alarmed by this social signal.

"He dances well," Clarissa said. "But Livvie, you must tell us what you think."

"He dances well," Olivia said listlessly.

"Who was that girl you spent so much time with?" the Duke asked his grandson.

Oliver was tackling the lunch as if he had not eaten for hours. In truth, he had not. The night had ended late and he had, most unusual for him, slept in. This lunch, served late, was his first meal of the day.

“Miss Denning,” he said. “The Earl of Lincoln was her mother’s brother-in-law. She lives with them and is a companion to Lady Beatrice, the Earl’s daughter.”

“You danced with the Earl’s daughter, did you not?” Grandmamma asked him.

“I did,” Oliver said, grinning. “I, unlike the Marquis, do not dance well.”

“You paid much attention to Miss Denning,” Grandmamma said. “It is, perhaps, unkind to do so.”

“Unkind?” Oliver repeated, confounded by the observation.

“She is a poor relation, and even if you were of marriageable age, which you are not, she would not be a suitable wife for the future Duke of Maddox.”

It was clear from the expression on his face that Oliver had not, up to this moment, thought of the evening’s partner as today’s future bride. It was also clear, as he colored from the attentive gazes, that he was rapidly reassessing not only the opinions of his family, but also his own.

By tacit understanding, the twins met later in the library after the ladies had gone on their calls and the gentlemen to their club.

“I say, Liv, this is turning out to be more complicated than I reckoned it would be,” Oliver said to her. He stirred the logs in the fire with a poker, making the flames blaze more brightly.

It was a cold day. Snow had fallen in the early morning and although it had ceased, it had left its February chill behind. The trees, bare of branches, stood starkly upon the landscape, shorn of the finery that embellished them in the kinder months to follow. There was no sun, merely the sullen, pouting gray clouds overhead, casting their ill humor upon the land beneath as if the ground were to blame for the lack of warmth above. Had they been home in the country, Oliver would have found the cold less objectionable, but winter seemed colder in London.

“Yes,” Olivia agreed.

“This Marquis . . . what d’you think of him?”

Olivia shrugged. "I do not think of him at all. He is very handsome and I am sure he is very elegant. But when I awoke this morning, he was not on my mind. In fact, when I considered the ball, I was glad that it was over and I need not see him. Should I not, if I were contemplating him as a husband, at least want to think of him?"

"Yes," Oliver said. "A dozen times a day, at least."

Olivia looked at him curiously. "You sound very certain. Miss Denning . . . have you been thinking of her?"

"I have, Liv," Oliver confessed. "I didn't put it all together until lunch, when Grandmamma said Miss Denning would not be a suitable Duchess. I never think of that. Papa will be the Duke when Grandpapa is gone. I don't think of myself as the Duke. I don't really want to."

"Did you enjoy talking to Miss Denning?"

"Very much. She made me laugh. And she made me think. I would like to talk to her again."

"Could you be in love with her?"

"Dash it all, Liv, how should I know? It's nearly impossible to get to know a girl well enough to realize such a thing. I wonder that anyone falls in love at all, with all the rules and chaperones and conditions that one must obey."

"Mama and Papa fell in love," Olivia said thoughtfully. "They are still in love. They must have known from the very first moment, even though their parents forbade them to marry."

The twins considered their parents in a new reflection. For the first time, they thought of them not as the mother and father who were fashionable members of the beau monde with the vices that were so in vogue and not as the disapproved-of offspring of their grandparents. Instead, they saw them a man and a woman who had met and fallen in love and been so much in love that they had eloped rather than be denied permission to wed.

"I suppose we could ask," Oliver said dubiously.

"I hardly like to. Mama and Papa will be leaving soon; I shouldn't want them to fret over us. We'll manage, Oliver, we always do."

“Yes, but I wonder if they will be leaving after all. They all seem to be getting on much better now. And if Mama and Papa miss the parties, they don’t seem to show it.”

Olivia brightened. “Mama accepted an invitation to supper from one of Grandmamma’s friend. I cannot think what they will have to talk about, but she seemed quite pleased to be invited.”

“Perhaps they won’t leave after all. Perhaps the Grands will reconsider banishing them to the country.”

“I wish they would banish us instead.”

The twins were correct in their perception that their parents were no longer under a cloud of parental wrath. The Duke invited the Countess to join him riding upon Rotten Row later in the week and was pleased when she accepted. When he apologized for the cold temperature, she waved a gloved hand. “Do you remember the year when it was so cold at Ascot that many of the ladies tried to beg off?”

“I do,” he said. “But you did not.”

“I’ve always enjoyed a good horse race and if the weather is cold, what of it? The horses still run.”

She sat her horse as well as if she were a young woman, he observed. In her black riding outfit and black hat, she was a figure of fashion, not age. The Duke prided himself upon his own equestrian carriage and he appreciated being accompanied by a woman whose seat was exemplary.

“I have been considering our decision to send Clarissa and Edmund back to the country,” the Duke began.

The Countess turned her head. “I have been doing the same,” she said, her features alight with interest.

The Duke noticed that her cheeks were red from the cold. The weather put a luster to her complexion that boasted of excellent health and vigor. It was not gentlemanly for a man to ponder a lady’s age, but he recalled the year that she had made her debut. She would be in her fifties, late fifties, he guessed. Well, what of that? She was an attractive woman who wore her years well and

that was to her credit. It was not until he had tendered the invitation to go riding that he wondered if he was asking too much of a senior lady. But it was plain that she was not averse to the exercise. He wanted to speak of the children but to do so in the house would have felt furtive. Better to do so outside when riding in the open air where, as grandparents, they could openly converse without speculation.

"I have been unjust to Edmund," the Duke said. "He has been most accommodating during this time. I wonder if we might think of letting them stay in London for the remainder of the season."

"I have also found myself appreciating Clarissa's help as we have planned Olivia's ball. She always was a lively girl and I daresay that I am often a quarrelsome old woman."

"Nonsense! You are no such thing."

"You are very kind, your Grace. I am glad that we are in accord on this matter. I think that having their parents about might help the twins. Olivia seems unaccountably lacking in interest in the season. To be courted by a marquis is the height of expectations and yet she declined an invitation to the opera, even though both her mother and I agreed that we would chaperone. Olivia loves the opera."

"Perhaps she cannot conceive of loving the Marquis," the Duke guessed.

"It would be a good match," the Countess said. "He has ascended to the title at a young age, to be sure, but the inheritance is, I believe sound, and he has no more than the usual failings of a young man. But when he came to call, Olivia was very quiet. I thought that it would improve when we returned the visit and called upon his mother, but once again, Olivia failed to respond beyond the most basic of answers. I have always found Lady Addington to be a gracious hostess and she was kindness itself to Olivia, but I do not think that Olivia made a very good impression."

"We can't force her to care for him. Perhaps there's something we don't know about. Edmund says the lad only returned from Italy within the last two months or so and has been so busy with his new title that he's done very little socializing. We shall have to see how matters proceed."

A Visitor

Finch opened the door to a young man who was unknown to him. As Finch only expected to greet people he knew, he frowned, making it clear by his demeanor that he did not feel obligated to offer entrance.

"I beg your pardon," the young man said courteously. "I'm here on a most unusual errand, I confess."

"Do you wish to speak with the Viscount?" Finch asked forbiddingly.

"I expect that I do, if he is the gentleman of the house."

"His Lordship is not receiving at this hour." Finch began to shut the door.

"Oh, please, I don't wish to inconvenience him. I merely want to see the sword of Ragnulf."

Finch did not open the door wider, but he did halt closing it. "The Sword of Ragnulf?"

"Yes, you see, I'm a bit of a historian, well, that is, I am at times like this when I'm not in uniform. Amateur of course. Historian, I mean, not soldier. I'm in the army, you see, but I'm home for the time being, thanks to this," he gestured toward the cane in his hand. "I took a bit of a wound in Portugal and was sent home to recover. It's taken longer than I expected, but now that Napoleon has escaped from Elba, I'm looking to rejoin my regiment. I'm putting the time to good use by walking every day, you see. But I'm also doing a bit of research on William the Conqueror and when my work disclosed that there is an existing sword wielded by one of the Conqueror's most trusted lords, of course nothing must do but for me to see it."

"It is not for me to show the Sword," Finch said with a tinge of

regret. The Viscount was still abed and was not, even when up, an enthusiast of family history. The Duke had called for the Countess to go riding, a new habit which the grandparents seemed to have adopted. Lord Oliver would have done the honors, but he had left the house soon after breakfast.

“Finch?”

The butler turned with relief at the sound of Lady Olivia’s voice.

“Yes, milady. There is a gentleman here who would like to see the Sword of Ragnulf. May I show it to him?”

“Of course. Please, come in. How do you know about the sword of Ragnulf?” Olivia asked, her tone casual. Although she was proud of the heirloom, she did not regard the item with the same veneration as Finch, who could not utter the words “Sword of Ragnulf” without sounding worshipful.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t properly introduced myself,” the young man said as he handed his hat and coat to Finch. “My name is Richard D’Arcourt. I serve with Wellington, at least I did, until this,” he gestured toward the cane. “I’ve hopes of writing a book on the Norman origins of England and in that endeavor, I’ve been doing some local research. I learned that the sword of Ragnulf is actually here and I hoped that no one would be offended if I asked to see it.”

Olivia laughed. “Offended? It’s perhaps our family’s greatest treasure, as Finch will show you.”

She went with Finch into the library, where a fire had been lit earlier. She had planned to take advantage of the quiet morning to sit in the library and read, untroubled by thoughts of proposals and suitors and marriage. Her book still in her hands, she walked over to the location of the sword. It was lodged with some ceremony in a narrow alcove of the library, hanging by its hilt across from the windows which, when the sun was shining, illuminated the steel and cast it in a sheath of gold. There was no such light today and the sword, to Olivia’s regret, looked as it always did, solid and serviceable, but not magnificent.

Except to the young man’s eyes. “Fancy being able to wield that,” he murmured as he raised his head. “Ragnulf must have been

impressive; swords at that time were ungodly heavy. It would have taken a lesser man both hands to use it and yet, by all accounts, Ragnulf used it as we would manage a knife at dinner.”

“You seem to know a great deal about it,” Olivia remarked. To her knowledge, no one had ever mentioned that her ancestor was particularly remarkable, other than for the fact that he had accompanied William the Conqueror and fought on the winning side, and being granted lands for his service.

“It’s rather a passion of mine,” the man said, sounding somewhat apologetic. “I wonder if I could trouble you to actually let me hold the sword in my hands.”

Finch looked to Olivia for permission to remove the sword from its perch.

“Certainly, if you wish,” Olivia said, flattered at the thought that the heirloom was more than just a family legend but still amused that a stranger would find it so worthy of attention.

Richard D’Arcourt held the sword reverently in his two hands after Finch handed it to him. “Have you been to Hastings, milady?”

“No . . . have you?”

“Oh, yes, several times. I find that it’s only possible to really understand how a battle unfolded if one can be present at the site. As a soldier, I’ve learned how much the terrain affects the outcome and it was no different for our ancestors. You must be very proud to think that this sword was part of the conquest of England from the Saxons.”

“I sometimes wonder how the Saxons felt about it,” Olivia said with a wry smile.

Mr. D’Arcourt laughed. “Yes, there is that. I suppose that, in their place, I would have a very different view of this sword. Still, they conquered the Britons who were here first.”

“I feel much better about Ragnulf, given that perspective,” Olivia said with a teasing note in her voice.

“I wonder if I would be intruding if I asked whether I may make a sketch of the sword?” Mr. D’Arcourt asked sheepishly. “You see, it

would be rather good to have illustrations if I'm going to write a book."

"Certainly you may do so," Olivia said. "Come into the drawing room; the light is better in there. If you wish to stay a bit longer, I'm sure my grandfather would enjoy talking to you about the sword. He's rather proud of our ancestor and will be much gratified to hear that someone else knows of him. He should be home before long."

"If I wouldn't be imposing, I would very much like that, milady," Mr. D'Arcourt said eagerly.

"Do you have drawing materials at hand? I'm sure we have something you could use."

"No need," he replied, gesturing toward the satchel that he carried over his shoulder. "Everything is in here. I travel with my studio."

The Duke was somewhat surprised, upon returning from riding, to learn that the drawing room was occupied by a soldier who was sketching the sword. "What if he's stolen it?" the Duke demanded, aghast that a complete stranger should have been granted such access to a valued treasure. "I cannot think what the Countess would think." As the Countess had gone upstairs to change, she was unaware of their visitor.

"He's in there now, Grandpapa, sketching," Olivia assured him. "I gave him permission. I also told him that you might enjoy speaking with him about the sword and about Ragnulf. He's writing a book about the Conquest."

"A book? It's about time someone gives Ragnulf his due. I'll certainly speak to him."

Speaking to Richard D'Arcourt extended to an invitation to the young man to stay for lunch, by which time the rest of the family members were about. Grandmother gave the young man a rather frosty greeting when she was introduced to him, her sharp gaze nearly impaling him with her visible doubt as to the authenticity of his reasons for being there. But the Duke, it was obvious, was won over by the young man's interest. Lady Clarissa and Lord Edmund were politely bored by the conversation.

"I am sorry that our son is not here," Clarissa said. "He is also a devotee of history and would enjoy hearing your thoughts on the matter. Where is Oliver?"

No one seemed to know. He had risen early, breakfasted, and gone out. It was most unlike him, but not a topic to be explored in the company of a stranger.

Lord Edmund could only endure so much historical discourse. "You say you serve with Wellington," he said finally, when there was a brief pause.

"Yes, light infantry. I plan to return in time to put paid to Bonaparte once and for all."

"Here, here," said the Countess approvingly. She had minimal sympathy for historians, but soldiers were another matter. "How on earth did he manage to escape from Elba?"

"He'll be back soon enough, milady, I assure you. Wellington will dispatch him as he did before."

"And what happens to your history of the Conquest when you return to the army?" Olivia asked.

"It will wait, as will other things," Mr. D'Arcourt answered her. "I will take it up again when I return from the army. First, the French."

Mr. D'Arcourt Returns

"Where did you go yesterday morning?" Olivia asked her brother the following day when they were alone in the library. She had asked Finch to serve lunch in the library, as only she and Oliver were at home. Mama and Grandmamma had gone shopping and Papa and Grandpapa had gone to Tattersall's to look at horses. It was pleasant to be at home with no obligations to make calls or engage in conversation about upcoming balls or suppers and the twins were making the most of it.

Oliver looked abashed. "I know it's wrong of me, but I met Miss Denning at the bookseller's shop. It was entirely proper, we only conversed casually and there was never a moment when we were out of sight of others. I could not think of any other way to see her and I realized that I very much want to see her."

"Do you love her?" Olivia asked hesitantly, aware that she was venturing into uncharted territory with her brother. As children, they had shared every thought, but they were children no longer.

"I could love her," Oliver answered, his voice thoughtful as he considered this new direction in his life. "She's very clever and kind. I don't think she has an easy way of it as the companion to the Earl's daughter."

"You were not impressed with Lady Beatrice?"

"I was not, but in fairness, Liv, I doubt that she minds. She is looking to wed and I must go off to Oxford this year; Grandpapa says so. But I could not think of spending my life with Lady Beatrice, even if I were of an age to marry. She is very pretty, I grant you and I suppose she will have her pick of suitors. But I will not be one of them. Miss Denning has no fortune and no name, but if I am to marry, it will be to her."

"Have you said so to her?"

“Not in so many words, but I am confident that we understand each other. If she is willing to wait, and I am willing to proceed as Grandpapa intends, we shall reach a point in our lives where we may declare ourselves. It will not be for several years yet, but there is nothing to be done about that. If I could be one-and-twenty tomorrow, I would do so, but I am eighteen. It’s different for girls.”

“Yes,” Olivia said, clearly unhappy that this was so. The Marquis had issued another invitation and she did not wish to accept it. She knew that her mother and grandmother were puzzled by her lack of interest in a man who was a desirable suitor and she could not explain why she felt the way she did. He was handsome. He had traveled. He was well-mannered. He was polished. But there was nothing in his conversation which stirred in her a yearning to speak more with him. She knew he was the sort of man she was expected to marry, but she was not comfortable with him. She wondered if, possibly, she was a bit afraid of him, or at least afraid of what it would mean to be a woman married to a man of his nature. If she told Mama and Grandmamma that, they would be dumbfounded. What did conversation have to do with anything, they would have wondered.

She didn’t know. But she had easily conversed with the young man, Richard D’Arcourt, who had no particular interest in tailors or cravats. He was interested in history, which in itself might have been considered a limited subject. But it had not been so. Grandpapa, who was not tolerant of bores, had enjoyed the conversation and Grandmamma had appreciated the sense of duty that made him want to return to his regiment.

Mr. D’Arcourt wasn’t as handsome as the Marquis, Olivia realized. He was a slender young man with kind dark eyes and tousled blond hair who did not dress in the most current fashion. She had felt as comfortable talking to him as she did with Oliver. But what did that signify? She would never see him again and, in any case, it was not as if he were a suitor. He was a soldier who wanted, when his service ended, to write a book. That was not a marriageable trait in the eyes of her grandparents. Even her parents, who were more tolerant on the subject of being in love before marriage, would not look kindly on the prospects of a young man who was not part of their set.

It did not matter, Olivia thought crossly. She was being foolish. She did not love the Marquis. Very well, she would not marry the Marquis. But she must marry someone and she would need to settle on that someone very soon. Otherwise, her season would be a failure and she would need to endure the whole miserable ordeal another time.

Finch knocked upon the door and entered. "Mr. D'Arcourt is here," he said.

"Mr. D'Arcourt? Show him into the library, Finch. Oliver has not met him. Oliver, it's the gentleman I told you about, the one who wanted to see Ragnulf's sword."

Oliver and Olivia rose as the young man entered. "Lady Olivia," Mr. D'Arcourt said, bowing. "I have come to thank you for your kindness yesterday."

"We were glad to welcome you, Mr. D'Arcourt," Olivia said. "May I present my brother, Lord Oliver? Oliver, this is Mr. D'Arcourt, the historian."

"You are most kind to call me that, but for now, I am merely Lieutenant Richard D'Arcourt. I shall be rejoining my regiment at the end of the week and leaving for Europe. But I could not leave without expressing my thanks."

"Will you join us for lunch?" Oliver invited him, noticing the change in his sister upon D'Arcourt's entrance. There was an expression in her eyes that he had never seen before and one which he had not noticed when she was in the company of the Marquis. "It's very simple, only cold meats, bread and cheese, but we should be glad of your company."

"I should decline, I know, as I have imposed upon your hospitality already." The young man's gaze traveled to Olivia. Olivia, her brother noticed, did not look away.

"Your visit was not an imposition. As I am the only one who has not met you, I should be glad to learn more about you." Oliver's expression was frank and the young man, startled at first, then gave an enormous smile as he realized the intent of the message.

"I am happy to tell you whatever you wish to know," he said

openly.

Olivia sat down. Why was her heart singing because this young man had returned to visit?

“I would like to know of your family,” Oliver said.

The young man nodded. “I am from a very ordinary family. My father was a vicar. My mother lives with her brother in Sussex. After my father died, I was obliged to leave Cambridge. There were no longer funds for my education. I settled on the army; as the threat of Bonaparte grew, it seemed to be a worthy vocation. Until I was wounded, I served with honor. I returned home to recover from my wound. As Bonaparte was exiled to Elba, it seemed that the danger was past. But my wound was slow to heal and I could not rejoin the light infantry until I could perform the duties of a soldier. It was then that I began walking long distances in order to restore myself to my former activity. As I took walks, I began to notice more of our wonderful island. I spent rather a lot of time in cemeteries, I admit, noticing gravestones and epitaphs.”

“That would seem to be a very gloomy pastime,” Oliver commented. “Please, help yourself to lunch. Cook has sent up much more than my sister and I can possibly finish on our own.” Rising from the sofa, he found a glass by the decanter and brought it forth to pour ale for D’Arcourt.

“Thank you. I . . . there is not much to tell.”

“On the contrary,” Oliver said with a smile, “I think there is very much to tell.”

“You have read me, I see,” D’Arcourt said with a smile.

“Olivia and I are twins, after all,” Oliver said. “It is not so strange, is it, that I would discern your reasons for returning?”

“Oliver!” Olivia chided him. “You must not be uncivil to our guest.”

“He is not being uncivil, milady,” D’Arcourt said earnestly. “He is merely urging me to an honesty which supersedes the customs of our time. It is true. I have nothing to offer and yet, after leaving yesterday, I could think of nothing but you. I am presumptuous, I know, to think that you could possibly entertain my suit---“

"You are not presumptuous, Mr. D'Arcourt," Olivia said breathlessly. "You are not presumptuous at all."

"Your family may not agree with that statement," he said with good humor. "I came here intending to request permission to pay court to you when I return from the Continent. I intended to do it all properly, truly I did. But now I have gone and declared myself to your brother, in your presence. I fear I have not conducted myself appropriately. But my haste, milady, is because I am a soldier."

"You have not been inappropriate," Oliver said. "Our father will return soon and you will be able to seek his permission."

"He will not favor my suit, I fear."

"Perhaps not," Oliver said honestly. "But I know my sister and she will not waver. Liv, what do you say?"

Olivia's gray eyes were shining. In her young face was all the answer that her brother and her suitor could have wished.

The Grands Contemplate Scandal

“There’s nothing to be done for it, I suppose,” the Countess said bitterly. “Olivia could have a Marquis who is most suitable. Instead, she intends to wait for a penniless soldier to return from battle. If he returns. And if he does, what sort of marriage does he offer her? He intends to write histories! I ask you, Your Grace, do you know anyone who matters who writes for a living?”

The grandparents were on their customary morning ride. The young soldier, having sought permission to court Olivia, was on his way to rejoin his regiment. Olivia had told her parents that she would not wed the Marquis. She would wait for Richard D’Arcourt to return from the battlefield. When he did, she would regard him and no other as her future husband. Her father, nonplussed by his daughter’s determination, had looked to his wife for guidance. But Lady Clarissa, although no more pleased by the prospects of the young man than were her parents or her husband, could not object. It was then that Oliver had announced that while he intended to follow the course that his grandfather had set and would enroll in Oxford, his heart was set on Miss Abigail Denning. When he was of age, he intended to offer for her.

The Duke sighed. “Matters have not gone as planned, milady,” he said. “We planned to see Olivia married well. We hoped to set Oliver on the right path. Most of all, we hoped to see our own children settled from lives of extravagance into temperance. I think we have succeeded with only the latter. I must take some consolation in that, after all. I have spoken with Edmund during these past weeks and I feel that there is soundness of judgment in him after all. I hope that your closeness with Clarissa has yielded the same hopeful news?”

“Yes, Clarissa is not nearly as reckless as I earlier thought. She is

very concerned about Olivia's choice, but she will not forbid it. She married for love, she reminds me and of all the members of the beau monde, she says that she and Edmund are the only couple who have remained true to their marriage vows. When it is put in that manner, how can I remonstrate with her? I do not hold with this marrying for love, mind you," the Countess said sternly. "But I would not wish for Olivia to be unhappy with her husband and it is very plain that she felt nothing for the Marquis."

"The girl lights up when D'Arcourt is near," the Duke agreed. "If that is an omen of a good marriage, then I cannot object. I am disappointed, I confess to you, but I cannot deny her. The lad seems sound, even if his choice of profession is a peculiar one. I daresay that I will settle enough on Olivia that she will not live in poverty. As the lad has no means, there is no reason why he should not, when they are wed, live upon the estate with the family."

"And Miss Denning? Oliver insists that he will wait and he will court no other. What if he changes his mind?"

"The twins know their minds with a wisdom beyond their years. Like you, I do not rejoice at the thought of my grandson wedding an aristocrat's poor relation. But it would seem that there is no deficiency of character in either Mr. D'Arcourt or Miss Denning. I suppose we must be grateful that, although they are poor in funds, they are not poor in morality."

The pair was silent as they rode. The Duke stole a sidelong glance at the Countess, sitting straight in the saddle, her profile as regal as if she were a duchess. As she should be.

"All this unlikely romance," he began. "I am quite unsure of myself."

"It's what comes of not obeying the rules," the Countess said. "Our children broke the rules when they eloped to Gretna Green years ago and now our grandchildren are following suit. It is most distressing."

"Yes . . . milady, I wonder if I might speak of a private matter?"

"Certainly," she told him. "If you have more to say on these developments, I am quite willing to listen. But I must say from the

start that our objections will be to no avail. The twins will follow their own course. That it is their parents' course may be my sorrow and yours, but we cannot alter that."

"I wonder if we, in our zest for rules, might have neglected to notice something about our children?"

The Countess could not imagine what could possibly be wrong with a zest for rules. "Whatever could that be?"

"Clarissa and Edmund love each other," he said simply. "Their years of marriage have been untainted by the usual blots upon the members of the ton. They have eyes only for one another. If Olivia and Oliver, in their choices, are blessed with the same fidelity, I should be very pleased."

"Yes, of course," the Countess agreed. "I never meant otherwise. Perhaps I failed to recognize that trait in our children when they seemed to have so many others which were not nearly so pleasant to contemplate. They seem to have settled. I hope so. But there are no guarantees."

"We can hope."

"With luck, they will conform to those hopes. We will not live forever, you know. Will they continue upon this reformed path when we are no longer here to guide them?"

"My lady," the Duke said in a stirring voice, "I have felt younger, in these last months in your company, than I have felt in as many years. I am emboldened to declare that, although I am an old man and past my prime, I have found myself youthening in your presence. I would not for the world insult you with attentions which are not welcome, but I am moved---"

The Countess raised the veil of her riding hat. "Your Grace," she said, "if you are going to propose marriage, pray do so when I can see you. I would not wish to accept a man who could not see my expression."

Her smile took the barb from her words.

"Then you will accept me?"

"I must confess that, ever since you and I decided to intercede in

our children's misadventures and direct our efforts toward our grandchildren's wellbeing, I have found myself eager to be with you. It is not proper for a woman to confess such a thing, I know, but I am not bound by the rules which constrict the young. I am old enough to know my own mind and make my own decisions. I daresay our children will be scandalized."

"Let them be!" he declared. "It's only fair that they should be the ones to be scandalized after all their follies. As you have noted, we are not constrained by the rules governing the young and I intend to capitalize upon that fact right now."

For weeks afterward, London was tantalized by the story of that March morning on Rotten Row when the Countess Everdene and the Duke of Maddox, both mounted on horses, leaned toward one another to share a kiss, on the lips, no less, in full view of all and quite impervious to the glares of the riders who found their passage blocked.

When Lady Clarissa learned of the episode from one of her friends, her first reaction was disbelief. But when Edmund came from his club to tell her of the most impossible news, she began to laugh.

"Is it not funny, darling Edmund? Our children have chosen their own paths to love, just as we did, and now our parents have followed suit! Do you think that Oliver and Olivia are a bad influence on their grandparents?"

Edmund smiled. "What do you say, Finch?" he asked of the butler, who was bringing in champagne so that the family could celebrate the announcement when the grandparents returned. "Do you think it's a scandal?"

"I could not presume to say, my lord," Finch said. But he was smiling.

* * *

Falling For The Recalcitrant Duke

A Historical Regency Romance Book

Embracing Fatherhood

“George, where are my niece and nephew?” Lord Percival Warren called out over his shoulder to the butler who was setting out his mid morning tea. His personal valet was out running some errands for him before he left for London just that morning. The Regent had sent summons that he needed him to do some restoration work on a number of paintings that had belonged to his mother and others he’d recently acquired. Percy was supposed to leave that afternoon but he couldn’t go without bidding the children farewell. What’s more, the governess he was expecting from London hadn’t arrived yet though the agency he’d contacted had sent word that she would be arriving today.

He walked to the window in his bedchamber on the first floor, a tall and distinguished man whose deep blue eyes scanned the immediate area outside the manor. This was the master’s chamber that had been occupied by his ancestors. Four dukes had gone before him because the title had been in his family for nearly one hundred years. The most recent duke had been his elder brother, Bernard.

The duchess’s room adjoined this one but for now was unoccupied because he wasn’t married. Genevieve’s things were still there because he couldn’t quite bring himself to clear them out and didn’t want any of the servants touching them. In any case, what was the hurry, it wasn’t as if he was getting married any time soon even though that had been his mother’s dying wish.

He missed his brother so much and each time he thought about him, tears pricked at the back of his eyes. Though there was an age gap of four years between them, the boys had been very close. Percy’s hands were folded across his chest and his eyes held deep grief. In days past, his father would often stand at this very spot looking down while he and his brother played on the lawn, their mother close by. Grandma Maeve, the dowager duchess would also

be out on the lawn making droll comments that would have them all laughing.

This had always been a happy house, until recently. His grandfather had been dead long before he and Bernard were born and Lady Maeve, the matriarch of the family had held things together until her son came of age and took over fully. She'd been witty and very outgoing, treating everyone like her family including the servants and tenants on the estate.

Leaning his head against the window pane, Percy groaned inwardly. He missed them so much and rapidly blinked away the tears. He didn't want any of the servants to see him as weak, even though they were also grieving the deaths of four people who had been dear to them.

George Sanders had started working for the Warren family when he was only fifteen years old and now sixty years later, he was still here. In all that time, he'd never seen grief such as was there right now in the manor. Looking over at his master, he saw the drooping shoulders and heard the deep sighing, signs of someone who was just holding on to his sanity by a whisker. No one would blame the current duke if he had a breakdown but from experience, George knew that Percival would remain strong in public but weep in private. From when he was a little boy, Percival maintained his stoic features so others wouldn't see his true feelings. His mother had often worried about him not being able to express himself. But his father felt that he did that best through his paintings which were often very elaborate as if he poured himself into them, which he actually did.

"Have you seen Aurie and Eddie?" George heard his master ask. "I asked you where the children were."

"Pardon me, your grace," the tall man bowed slightly due to his stiff back. "Your tea is served." He was in his seventies but Percy couldn't imagine the manor without him. George had served his grandfather, father and brother who'd been the dukes before him and Percy didn't think the manor could continue its existence without the elderly man. "They went out to play this morning but I haven't seen them since. Shall I send someone to search for them?"

“Yes please, I’d like to leave for London as soon as Leonard returns from the village square and I want to bid them farewell even as I give them strict instructions on how to behave. Their new governess is expected this morning and I don’t want them to give her any trouble at all.”

“Very well then, your grace,” George bowed once again and left the bedchamber. Percy strode to the large writing table that had been part of this room since the manor was built decades ago and sat down. His ancestors had been very good at selecting furniture for the manor and in the following decades, very little replacement was done. Instead, whenever the need to repair anything arose, the particular piece would be handed over to masterful hands for restoration.

The last duke, who’d been his brother Bernard and the twins’ father, had married a woman who loved sculpting. Genevieve, who was half French from her mother’s side, had done more to beautify the manor with her skilfully sculpted images and one or two of her sculptures adorned the front lawn.

“I never asked for this,” he ran a hand over the smooth surface of the small davenport that stood next to the writing table and looked very feminine in the midst of all the other masculine furniture in the room. It had belonged to his mother and when he took over these rooms, he’d had it brought from the duchess’s chambers. Her death just a few days after his arrival from Paris had left him quite depressed. She’d loved his father and he now knew that she had only been holding on until he returned.

As the second living son of the duke, Percy had never begrudged his brother his position like many of his peers. He’d heard and personally witnessed the horrors of sibling rivalry among his friends and promised himself that he would never do that to his brother. Instead, he did all he could to support Bernard when he became the duke after their ailing father couldn’t perform his formal duties any more. Bernard had suited the part for he was tall and broad, attesting to their Viking ancestry. In contrast, Percy though tall, was slender like his mother had been.

Instead of letting his father buy him a commission in the British Army, Percival had decided to move to Paris and study art under

one of the world's masters. Monsieur Jean Pierre Atelier was a legend and in a class of his own. He owned a large mansion beside the Tuileres Gardens and that was where he took his favourite students for their training.

Percy had become one of Atelier's students because the famous artist thought his work was really good. He mostly did restoration work although he also painted his own pieces. When he'd moved to Paris and just started out, his mother had insisted on supporting him for a while even though his paintings almost immediately started selling very well. He'd even dreamed of one day owning a chateau somewhere in Montpelier, close to the warm beach where Monsieur Atelier had once taken him and a few other students for an exhibition. Percy had fallen in love with the coastal town and vowed to himself that he would one day live there.

But then his grandmother died four years ago, his father fell ill and his brother had to take over the duchy. At the time, the duchy was heavily in debt because his father lost all interest in the estate after the dowager's death. When Bernard wrote to tell him what was happening, he decided to support his family as much as possible and his dream of owning a chateau had to be shelved. Sending financial aid to his family had given him immense satisfaction for though he was determined to settle in France, Warrenshire in Salisbury was still his home.

Bernard had proved to be a good manager and had turned their fortunes around, such that in just three short years, Percy didn't need to continue supporting his family any more.

So he'd started saving for his chateau once again, but then news reached him of the death of his long ailing father and before he could make arrangements to return home for the funeral, he received news that his brother and Genevieve had perished in a boating accident. He was now the duke and there were great responsibilities awaiting him. His mother also needed him and he'd been shocked when he came to find her just a pale shadow of her former self.

Losing her husband, son and daughter-in-law within days of each other was too much for her and he recalled one of their final conversations just a few days before she passed away.

"Percy," she had lain in bed quite weak and held out a hand to him. "You're all I have left, and the twins. You need to take care of your brother's children very well."

"Ma, you're going to be alright," he couldn't imagine that he was about to lose her too. He hadn't been there for his grandmother's burial and he'd been days late for his father, brother and sister-in-law's as well. "You're a strong woman."

"Of course, I am," she joked but he could see the strain on her face. "No one belonging to the Warren House whether by birth or by marriage goes down without a fight."

"That's very true," he agreed.

"Percy, I had started looking around for a nice young woman from a good family for you."

"Ma."

"Hear me out, please. Your niece and nephew are devastated after losing their parents and I tried all I could to make things easy for them but see me now. I can't take care of you or my grandchildren while I'm like this. You need a wife, Percy, someone who will love you and the little ones as well. As the next duke, people will be confident if you have a wife by your side."

"Ma, Edgar is rightfully the next duke after his father. He's the next duke, Ma."

"While that is true, he's still a little boy and needs you to hold things together until he comes of age and is able to take up his title. But that won't be for another nearly fifteen or so years and we can't leave a vacuum now, can we? Someone needs to take care of the estate and the tenants."

Percy would have been happy to let the duchy pass on to a distant cousin, but for the twins and especially Edgar. He was the next in line after his father and bringing in someone else to take the title could create problems in future. He'd seen many families destroyed because of the greed of outsiders and didn't want that to happen to his nephew. He could never abandon his family, so he'd grudgingly decided to take the title and be the duke.

His mother had passed away peacefully in her sleep just days later and though that was three months ago, he still felt the loss deeply. The house was still in mourning and he knew that things would never be the same again. He was now the duke and his brother's children depended on him to do the right thing. It had interfered with his own plans but no one ever foresaw death, especially not the kind that had struck his family. Losing four family members in the short span of three months was a real tragedy and he had to be strong for everyone. But who would be strong for him, he often wondered.

Over the past few weeks that he'd been Aurelia and Edgar's guardian, the little critters had grown on him and now he couldn't imagine his life without them. Maybe he was clinging onto them for his own survival but that didn't matter. He wasn't alone because they were there and filled a deep void in his life. He'd also grown to love them so much. The only problem was finding someone to take care of them full time because he still had his paintings to do. It was a passion that ran through his blood and couldn't be quashed or silenced.

Though he'd been scared about being a good guardian in the beginning, he soon realized that the twins were so used to their own company that they rarely bothered anyone. They reminded him of Bernard and himself when they were growing up. As long as there was someone to watch over them from a distance, they were content to keep their own company.

Genevieve had always taken care of her children's education and so a governess was never employed but they obviously needed one now. It was imperative that they get formal education and especially Edgar. As the next duke, he'd have to be well versed on different issues and this was the time to begin preparing him for his future role. Percy had no intentions of being the duke for the rest of his life because his art was very important to him. Besides that, he held a title of his own on his mother's side, which he was yet to fully acknowledge seeing as he was wrapped up in matters of the duchy.

The twins also needed someone to guide them on social behaviour and etiquette and he didn't have the time or the patience to do that; hence the reason for hiring a governess from London. Someone also

had to watch them all the time and ensure that they didn't get into any kind of mischief. While nothing had happened so far, he didn't want to take any chances. The two of them were so much like he and Bernard had been and he could recall some of their hair raising escapades.

The door opened and his butler entered the chamber once again.

"George, have you found the children?"

"No, your grace, but Naomi and Ella are out helping the stable boys to search for them."

Percy shook his head, "They shouldn't have bothered. Those two will show up when they want to. Let me go and check on the horses before Leonard returns. I need to make sure they're all ready for the journey."

"Yes, your grace."

It didn't take Percy long to check on his two prize horses. He'd purchased them just a few weeks ago and this was going to be their first long trip away from home. He was just glad that between Salisbury and London, all the inns he would stop at belonged to friends. All his horses were usually well taken care of in those places and he didn't have any reason to worry.

Once Percy was sure the carriage had also been prepared for his journey by one of the stable boys, he made his way back to the house, passing through the front lawn this time.

"Uncle Percy," he heard Edgar call out and he turned to receive the two children who looked really excited. They ran up to him, their hands full.

"Where have you been?"

"We saw Miss Campbell and she gave us these flowers and cookies to bring to you," his little nephew held up a pretty bouquet of red and white roses.

"Is that right?" For some days now, they would bring him beautiful roses and claim that some woman named Miss Campbell had sent them. He was curious as to the kind of woman who would send a man flowers. He'd never had any woman give him flowers before

and he purposed that once he returned from London, he would make the twins show him this Miss Campbell. Still, it felt nice that someone remembered him in his time of grieving. Perhaps the woman was sending him the flowers as a comforting gesture. This enigmatic Miss Campbell was probably a sweet, elderly woman who just wanted to express her sympathies for his tragic loss.

“I have to leave for London,” he told the children once they were inside the house. “There’s someone who will be coming to take care of you while I’m gone. Make sure you give her no trouble at all or you’ll have to contend with me when I return.”

“Yes, Uncle Percy,” they said obediently even though he could see the cheeky gleams in their expressive blue eyes which were so much like his. The twins could actually pass for his offspring, which they actually were now that their parents were dead.

“If you’re good, I’ll bring you both something really nice from London. Now....” his words were interrupted by a knock at the door. “Go up to the nursery while I see who is standing at the door. It’s probably the governess but it’s strange that I didn’t hear any carriage drawing up to the manor,” he half spoke to himself even as he walked down the hall to the door.

When he opened the door, the most beautiful woman with gray eyes stood there observing him solemnly.

The Little Rascals

There was a tinkling sound and then a crash, and muffled giggles which faded away even as Penelope Campbell stood up from behind her writing desk and strode angrily to the door. She opened it with more force than was necessary, wincing as her arm felt the strain.

“Serves you right for not counting up to ten,” she muttered. Her grandmother would have told her that anger rests in the bosom of fools but this time she argued that it was justified. One of the windows of her kitchen was broken and she knew it was the little rascals who’d come calling again. She’d never actually seen the children who often came and did mischief around her cottage. But to be fair, they had never spoilt anything until today.

“I’ll catch you one day,” she shouted even knowing that she was speaking more to the wind than to the children. Shaking her head in resignation, she went to see how much damage had been done. Surprisingly, apart from the broken window pane, nothing else was harmed. Then she saw the small rock that had caused the damage and picked it up. It didn’t feel like an ordinary rock and was the size of a grown up man’s folded fist. She frowned slightly and walked back to the living room to observe it further.

“Oh dear!” She exclaimed when she realized what it was. This was not a rock; it was a blue agate, smooth and really beautiful. The contrasting colours mesmerized her and she couldn’t imagine what the owner would feel when he or she realized that it was missing. “Where did those rascals get this from?” She wondered, studying it. It clearly belonged to someone of means because it was polished and looked pricey. She’d seen smaller stones than this one in jewellery stores in London and they cost a pretty sum. There were two small holes on the top surface and she deduced that it was used as a pen holder for storing writing quills. Someone was going to be looking for this but she had no idea who, since she’d never seen the little rascals who had tossed it through her window. Whose children

were they, she wondered, because she would like to find their parents and give them a piece of her mind.

Feeling a little bit cooped up with all the writing she had been doing prior to the interruption, Penny decided to go out into her garden and take a look at her roses. She grew them from small bushes that she often got from the different gardens around Warrenshire, the local seat of the Duke of Salisbury of the House of Warren. Her grandmother had taught her a lot about different herbs and plants and how to make soap and perfume from roses and other scented flowers. It was now a much loved hobby and apart from keeping her busy, put food on her table.

This cottage had been part of the former dowager house until the late duke, Lord Bernard Warren had built a new guest house much closer to the large family manor. That was nearly four years ago when his father became too ill to handle the day to day duties pertaining to his office. His mother had wanted to live in seclusion because she didn't want people agitating her ill husband. And Bernard wanted his mother closer to him rather than living in the dowager house that his grandmother had once occupied.

Many years ago, Penny's grandfather had worked as a footman for the estate and when he suddenly died after being ambushed by highwaymen, Lord Martin the present duke's father then gave her grandmother this cottage. He'd also made a promise that for as long as she lived, no one would ever exact rent from her, nor would she be bothered. The cottage came with a small plot on which Grandma Prudence had started growing vegetables, flowers and herbs and using them to make perfumes and soap. Her father was brought up in this cottage and even after he moved away to work on another estate, Penny had loved visiting her grandmother whenever they could.

Grandma Prue had taken Penny in when her own parents died and upon her death two years ago, Lord Bernard reiterated the same promise made by his father. This was her home and she was well looked after even though she'd never been to the manor itself. When Lord and Lady Warren perished about three months ago, she had grieved along with all the other tenants for the future was quite uncertain. Penny had only heard about the duke's brother who lived in Paris and so far, had only seen him from a distance. She didn't

know if he would allow her to continue living on his estate especially since she wasn't one of his regular tenants.

That was the reason she'd poured her heart into learning all she could about making soap and perfume which she then supplied to the manor. At least let it be said that she was good for something, should the duke ever ask.

Now as she walked through her half acre garden of roses, a frown marred her brow. Something was wrong and upon further investigation she realized that someone had stolen some of the rose heads and she had no doubt that it was the rascals. They had pruned the flowers off in a way that would enable them to grow again and she admired their skill. Someone must have taught them how to do it and Penny deduced that they must be teenagers. She noticed that she was missing about six stalks. It wasn't such a great number but she was sure that they would be back for more. How hadn't she realized that she was losing flowers? The only thing left to do was to watch out for them and see if they returned, then she would know what to do.

They did, twice again in the next few days before she decided to set a trap for them. Plucking the best flowers, she placed them on the bushes closest to her door, making sure to keep them glued on by some soft plant sap. Then she waited with her door closed as usual, but this time she wasn't inside the house. She was hiding behind a small bush by the side of the cottage waiting for the culprits.

And they came. She was surprised to see that there were only two of them and just about six years old. At first she couldn't tell if they were boys or girls because they had the same short hair and spoke in similar voices. They were also wearing the same kind of play skeleton suits. It was only when they turned and she saw their faces clearly that she found out that they were twins and looked very much alike.

"Edgar, hurry up and pluck the flowers before Miss Campie comes and finds us."

"Miss Campbell," Edgar whispered back indignantly. "It's rude to shorten a person's name if they haven't given you their permission to do so." His words made Penny smile and she wondered whose

children they were.

“Quick, before she opens the door.”

“I’m doing my best, but the scissors won’t cut through,” he hissed. “You just had to go and pick up the bluntest pair of scissors.”

“Why didn’t you get the sharper ones from Marion then? Because you were scared that’s what. Just hurry up and get those roses.”

“Coming.”

Penny noted that their language was refined, not like that of servants’ children. These were definitely well educated children even though they were small and she got angry. People ought to take good care of their children so they don’t cause destruction to other people’s property.

The two were so bent on getting the flowers that they didn’t notice when Penny got behind them and grabbed them by their necks, causing them to yelp. They tried to get away but her hold was firm being careful not to choke them.

“So, you’re the rascals who’ve been destroying my plants! You broke my window and it cost me a lot to have it repaired so I’m going to take you to your parents and tell them what you’ve done.”

The boy started to drool and had a funny look on his face. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Edgar has a disease,” the other twin said in a trembling voice. “If he doesn’t eat soon, he’ll lose consciousness.”

“Quick, let’s get him into the house so I can give him some milk and cookies.” She forgot all about her anger and was very concerned about the little boy’s health. Picking him up, she hurried into the cottage with his sister following her closely. What would she tell people if something were to happen to him while he was at her house? “Is he always like this?”

“Not unless he’s hungry. We’re very hungry, Miss.”

“Don’t worry, we’re here now and I’ll give you both something to eat,” She put the child at her small table in the kitchen and served them the promised milk and cookies.

If she was surprised at the quick recovery that the boy made after taking the snack she set out, Penny didn't show it. She had a feeling that the children were jesting with her but she hadn't had anyone to talk to for a few days and didn't mind their company. "What's your name?" She asked the other twin.

"Aurelia," she said, covering her mouth as she spoke because it was full.

"You're a girl?"

"Yes she is," Edgar said. "Aurie, hurry up or Uncle Percy will whip us."

"What?" Penny was horrified. "Why would he whip you?"

"If we leave home he whips us and then he doesn't give us anything to eat," Aurie's eyes filled with tears. "We were so hungry and you saw that Eddie nearly swooned."

"Why doesn't he feed you? Where are your parents?"

"They're both dead," and the two children put their heads on her table and wept. Penny was so shocked that for a moment she sat still, not knowing what to do.

"Hush," she finally rubbed their shoulders gently. "I won't tell your uncle that you've been taking my flowers if you promise to stop doing that. I use those flowers to make soap and perfume which I sell so I can buy myself some food."

"We're sorry, Miss Campbell. We won't take your flowers again."

"And how did you know my name?"

The twins looked at each other. It was Edgar who answered her. "Mrs. Marion told us that you're the pretty lady who sells the sweet smelling soap so we don't have to use the other hard one, the one that smells really bad. That's how."

"Who's Marion?" The only other person named Marion that she knew was the housekeeper and cook up at the manor, and she was the one to whom Penny always sold her products.

"The c...."

"The church lady," Aurelia gave her a sweet smile but Penny knew her brother had been about to say something totally different. These children had a lot that they were hiding but she didn't want to go into that right now. They probably had their reasons for doing so, especially if they had a harsh uncle who might not like them speaking to strangers.

"Where did you meet this church lady so she told you about my soap and gave you some to use?" She narrowed her eyes, not really believing that explanation.

"At church," Aurelia gave her an exasperated look. "Mrs. Marion is really nice and gives us cookies but please don't tell our uncle that."

"I don't know your uncle so why would I tell him anything?"

The twins deliberately ignored her question and Aurie pushed her cup and plate away. "Thank you for the snack but we have to get going or Uncle Percy will beat us up."

"Why would he beat you up?"

"If we're late going back home," Edgar said and Aurelia nodded. They got off their seats.

"Why did you take my flowers?"

"We just wanted to put them on Papa and Mama's graves because we love them very much and miss them."

"Oh darlings," she immediately felt remorseful for being angry at them before. "Whenever you need to get some flowers for your parents' graves, just come to the house and ask me for them. You don't have to steal them. I'll give you as many as you need but you have to ask."

"Yes, Miss Campbell."

"Good, now, I'd like to meet your uncle."

"No please," they looked so horrified that she wanted to retract her statement but she needed to see the man who treated these children abominably. No child should have to be treated the way this Mr. Percy, whoever he was, was treating these poor children.

“Why wouldn’t you want me to meet your uncle?”

“If you report us to Uncle Percy, he’ll whip us soundly and send us to bed without any food.”

“Oh dear,” Penny couldn’t take it anymore. But she could see that the children were really scared. “Alright then, you run on home but promise that you won’t do anything bad again, like stealing flowers and breaking my window.”

“We promise.”

“Good,” she wanted to hug them and hold them close and keep them safe from their bad uncle but she had to let them go back home. “Do you want to take some cookies with you?”

“Yes please, Miss Campbell.”

She quickly packed some cookies for them and saw them out, but as soon as they had left, she followed them at a discreet distance, taking care not to be seen. She’d also remembered the agate and wanted to return it to the rightful owner so she had slipped it into the pocket of her frock. Somehow, she doubted that the twins knew the true value of the stone and whoever it belonged to must be searching for it or would once they found out that it was missing.

The children were so excited about the cookies and the extra flowers she’d allowed them to take with them that they didn’t even notice her following them. Too bent on getting home, they didn’t once look back and for that she was glad.

Penny was surprised when instead of turning into the road that led to the village where she expected them to come from, they went up the driveway to the manor. Their uncle probably worked at the duke’s manor and she wondered that no one had noticed them being abused by their guardian. Now she understood their connection to Mrs. Marion. The woman probably gave them morsels from the duke’s kitchen whenever she could. “Bless her kind heart,” Penny murmured. At least someone cared enough for the children. But she still needed to confront this wicked uncle and show him the error of his ways. For now, she had to keep hiding in case the twins turned around and saw her but she needn’t have worried. They were too engrossed in their cookies and flowers to bother looking

over their shoulders.

“Uncle Percy,” Aurelia shouted and a tall man who was just walking up to the front door of the large manor turned around. Even from the slight distance, Penny could make out that he was handsome but more than that, he had a broad and welcoming smile on his face.

“Where have you rascals been,” his tone was loving and they both rushed up and hugged him. “I’ve been looking all over for you, actually everyone in the manor and the estate has been searching for you. I hope you didn’t get yourselves into any kind of trouble now.”

“Uncle Percy, we met a lovely lady and she gave us these flowers to give you, and these cookies.”

“Oh she did?” Percy’s voice was full of laughter. “And pray tell me, who is this lady?” He took their hands and led them up to the front door where he raised his hand to the knocker.

Penny didn’t hear whatever else the children had to say because the door opened and the three of them went in, all holding hands.

She was a little bit confused. If that was the children’s uncle then he lived in the manor and then it suddenly hit her. Of course, Percy was Percival Warren, or the Duke of Salisbury and in that instance, Penny knew she’d been had. Edgar and Aurelia were the niece and nephew of the current duke.

She’d never actually met the duke but had seen him pass by her cottage a few times on horseback. He was a good rider and she’d peeped at him from behind her curtains, not wanting him to see her.

Then she laughed at herself. Those two children were really rascals and she turned to leave, but then something drew her back. She needed to make sure they were fine and that they wouldn’t be punished for their mischievous ways.

“Or you just want to gaze upon the face of the duke,” an inner voice told her and she quashed it. Before her courage deserted her, she found herself standing at the large door and knocking on it.

Mistaken Identity

Expecting the butler to open the door, Penny was stunned when the duke himself stood before her. She was rendered speechless for a moment and felt like she was about to swoon. His eyes were the most beautiful blue and seemed to twinkle at her. A woman could get lost in them if she allowed herself to. If she wasn't wrong, he looked almost delighted to see her and she wondered if he knew her from somewhere.

"Good, you've arrived," he said and she frowned then suddenly realized that she was in the presence of nobility and curtsied. "The children are in the nursery but I'd like to show you around."

"Your grace..." her voice was unsteady.

"Please don't ask me any questions right now," he begged. "I have to leave for London immediately and was just waiting for you to arrive." He looked down at her feet. "Where's your luggage?" Then something struck him. "I'm sorry, you must have lost it on your way here. Please do come in and Marion will find you something to wear."

"Your grace..."

"I asked you not to interrupt," and saying this, he practically pulled her into the house and shut the door. "Come with me," he said and without waiting to see if she was following him or not, he strode down the hallway, pointing out the different rooms as he went. "The house has two floors and two wings and we call them the west and east wing. My chamber and the children's nursery are in the east wing upstairs while my grandmother for a while after she moved out of the dowager house, occupied the west wing on the ground floor. Do you have any questions about the house?" She had none. "The children are supposed to have lessons in the mornings only and in the afternoon they should take a short nap then have music or art lessons. You'll prepare your own timetable that's

suitable for you and the twins, though I must warn you that they're little critters and can be very mischievous. But they've never harmed anyone before and I love them, which is why I want the best for them," he threw her a quick glance over his shoulder as he continued walking.

Truly, Penny was more interested in the beauty of the house than in the words that the duke was speaking. She'd always wondered what the manor looked like on the inside, given that the outside was splendid, especially in summer.

When she'd first come to live with her grandmother after losing her parents to tuberculosis ten years ago, she would walk to the edge of the compound and hide among the trees watching the manor. It had awed her then and it still did now, but she'd never been inside. Each time the duchess had held a ball, Penny had imagined herself as one of the invited guests, dressed in all her finery and riding in a majestic carriage up to the front door. Being received like an honourable guest and dancing with handsome nobles and gentry often tickled her imagination. She would have stars in her eyes for days after that and sometimes Grandma would have to gently smack her knuckles to bring her back to earth.

Lost in her own world, Penny didn't realize that the duke had stopped and she bumped into him. She came back to earth with a bump and rubbed her forehead absentmindedly.

"Miss?"

"Penelope," she said without thinking. "Sorry."

"Are you alright?" His hand touched her forehead and she could feel the strength in his fingers, yet they were also very gentle. She'd once heard someone mention that he was an artist and she found herself staring at his long beautiful fingers. "Miss Penelope, are you alright?"

"I'm sorry, your grace," she curtsied and he smiled at her.

"As I was saying, this is where our tour ends. The rest will be done by George," he opened a door and ushered her into a large room that had bookcases lined up along three walls, and then the large windows that led out to the patio. "My father had this study

changed from the back of the house to the front for easier access,” he said, when he saw her looking through the windows. “But that’s a story for another day.” He rang the bell and a few minutes later, a man who Penny deduced to be the butler knocked and entered. “George, this is Miss Penelope and she’s the children’s governess. Please show her to the nursery right away so she can meet them. She lost her luggage on her way here and you should ask Marion to get her some clothes to change. I think Leonard is already back now and we have to leave at once,” he smiled briefly. “Miss Penelope, please forgive the unconventional way that I have to leave. We’ll discuss your wages when I return, but meanwhile, George will ensure that you have everything you need.”

And just like that, she was once again ushered out of the room, taken up a flight of stairs and George opened a door to reveal a beautiful nursery. The twins were playing in one corner and when they saw her, both turned a sickly yellow colour.

“Children, your uncle asked me to bring Miss Penelope to the nursery,” he bowed slightly and then left.

Penny turned and put her hands on her hips and gave the children her most stern look. “Well?”

“Miss Campbell, we’re sorry,” Aurie said.

“What are you sorry about? Lying to me about having a wicked uncle who whips you soundly and sends you to bed hungry? Or are you sorry for the fact that you’ve been stealing my flowers to give to your uncle?” The children turned red and she could see the guilt on their faces. They looked so adorable and scared and she wanted to giggle, but she wasn’t done with them yet. “I heard you telling your uncle that I was the one who sent him the flowers and cookies. Why would you lie to him like that?”

The twins looked at each other then back at her.

“So you won’t speak? Perhaps I should go and tell your uncle what the two of you have been up to.”

“No please,” Eddie begged. “We’ll be good children, we promise. Please don’t tell Uncle Percy.”

“Oh don’t worry about that for now since your uncle assumed that

I'm your new governess and he's already left for London. But please tell me, why did you make up all those lies?"

Aurie raised her hand.

"Yes, dear?"

"Miss Campbell, we have seen you at your cottage many times and we thought you would make Uncle Percy a good wife. You see, Grandma Dora wanted him to marry but she died before he could find a wife."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Miss Campbell, we kept coming to your house to ask you but we were afraid. That's why we threw the rock into your house. We've also been taking your roses and bringing them to Uncle Percy and we told him that they were from a lady who sent them to him. We wanted him to think that you were interested in him so he could come and look for you."

"What you did do." Penny was glad the duke wasn't home because she didn't know how she would have faced him otherwise. "You went too far." She put her hands over her warm cheeks, feeling herself blushing. Mercifully, the duke hadn't sought her out as the children had hoped. But what if he did that upon his return?

"We didn't know what else to do. Uncle Percy misses our grandmother a lot and we didn't want him to be lonely."

"But you shouldn't have told him such falsehoods. And now, I need to return home so I can carry on with my life."

"No," they both cried out just as the door opened. Eddie rushed towards the elderly butler. "George, please tell Miss Campbell that she can't leave."

He turned his eyes towards her and she shrugged. "The duke had the mistaken idea that I was the governess and that's why he asked you to bring me to the nursery. I actually live in one of the cottages on the estate and Marion knows me."

"Oh dear!" George exclaimed. "We were expecting the governess to arrive and thought she would be here before his grace left for London. Now I don't know what to do."

“Aren’t there other servants who can take care of the children?”

George shook his head. “Marion is very busy with the cooking while the scullery and chamber maids have no experience with children. Besides, they’re not properly educated and can’t give the children their lessons.”

“They could watch them until the governess comes.”

Once again George shook his head. “Miss Campbell, I’m afraid they’re not able to because they don’t live at the manor. Each of them has a family and after they finish their work, they usually go home. These children need round the clock care. Would you consider staying just for a while?”

Penny thought for a moment and then made the mistake of looking at the children. They had such sad expressions that her heart was deeply moved. “Alright then, I’ll stay just until your own governess comes then I have to go back home.”

Foster Mother

She was demented and quite out of her mind, Penny thought as she watched the twins frolicking in the sandpit that she'd asked George to help her build for them. They were bored and clearly missing their uncle. Even though they tried to pretend to be strong little children, she could sense their fear. They'd lost so much in just a few months. First, their grandfather then just a few days later both parents and weeks later, their grandmother. Now, their uncle wasn't home and they were probably scared that he wouldn't be coming back either, that he'd probably also left them.

In the ten days that she'd lived with them as their governess, each of the children had had nightmares and holding them each night while they clung to her and their sobs had nearly broke her heart. For the moment, she'd put off lessons and just let them play until they were tired enough to fall into deep sleep.

She wished she could write to Lord Percival and tell him what was going on but then decided that he might find her troublesome. In any case, she wasn't the governess he'd been expecting and she really couldn't tell how he would handle that. She would have to do the best she could to ensure the children were alright until their uncle returned.

But there was a problem. She just couldn't get the duke out of her mind. Long after the children were in bed, she would gaze up at the ceiling in the darkness, seeing his smile, the way his eyes seemed to have laughter lurking in them but also shadows of pain. Just like the twins, he'd also lost his family and what's worse, he hadn't seen them for a while. He was in pain and so, according to George, hid himself behind his paintings. The twins were actually his lifeline and that he loved them dearly was quite obvious in the way he tried to take good care of them.

Penny sighed as she blinked rapidly to bring her mind back to focus

on the children. They were seated in the sandpit, not playing any more but just staring at her.

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you playing anymore?”

“Aurie asked you a question but you didn’t answer. Are you angry at us?”

“Oh my darlings,” she quickly got off the bench and joined them in the sandpit. They made room for her and she sat between them. “I love you both so much and I’m not angry with you. I just had something on my mind, that’s all.” She pulled them close and kissed them both on their foreheads. “What was it you asked me, Aurie?”

“Will Uncle Percy ever come back?” The child asked in a small voice. “Has he gone away forever like grandpapa and grandmamma and our papa and mama?”

“Oh child,” she blinked the tears away. “Your uncle is just finishing work for the Regent Prince and then he’ll be back home soon. He loves you and is only staying away because his work is keeping him from you. But I’m very sure that he’d rather be here with you.”

“Will he come soon?” This from Edgar.

“I believe so. Now, what were we building?”

“Aurie wanted you to take us to the beach so we can build sand castles,” the boy said. “These ones are no good because there’s no water to mix the sand with. Ma used to take us to the beach all the time, I miss her,” he said, kicking the small bucket away from him.

“I know that, my darling. But since we don’t have your uncle’s permission to leave home, we can’t go to the beach. But as soon as he comes, I’ll ask him and then I promise, you can go to the beach.”

“Will you come with us?” The smiles were back on their faces and she nodded, though she wasn’t sure if the duke would let her stay once he found out that she wasn’t the governess he’d been expecting.

“Lovely Aurie, nothing will keep me from going to the beach.”

Percy didn't think that he'd miss the children so much while he was away from them but he found himself longing to see them. He spent a lot of time wondering what they were doing and if they were happy. He hoped they'd settled down with the new governess and that there were no problems at home. He was sure nothing was wrong because so far, no mail had come from Warrenshire telling him that things weren't the way they were supposed to be.

But the urge to return home and be with his family became so strong with each passing day that he started preparing for his exit. He'd done most of the restoration on the paintings and even received commissions to do plenty more, but decided that he would seek the Regent's permission to carry some work back to Salisbury with him.

"This work will take me months to finish," he told Lord Simon Chambly, the Duke of Cottingshire and one of Regent's closest friend and advisors just two days later. "I have familial obligations and therefore can't spend too much time away from my estate. Besides that, my tenants need me and if I'm away too long, may just get it into their heads to rebel." He twisted his lips. "You know that I recently lost my brother and sister-in-law and their children are now my wards. Those little ones need me to be there for them and I find that I can't stop thinking about them. Their new governess arrived on the same day that I was leaving for London so I have no idea if she's any good and knows how to take care of the twins."

"What would you suggest? These paintings are highly esteemed by the Regent and he wants them fully restored within the shortest time possible. Now that that mad man of France is in exile in Elba, things are just beginning to settle down and it's clear life has to go on."

Percy understood it to mean that the Regent would begin entertaining on a large scale like he'd done ever since he came of age. The man had an endless supply of energy and threw himself wholeheartedly into pursuits of the flesh, as Lady Maeve, his grandmother would have said. Though Percy had lived in Paris for many years, there was something about overindulgence that put a

bad taste in his mouth. In the few days that he'd been here, he'd had to hide himself behind his work in order to avoid some of the blatant offers that he received from the women who adorned the Regent's courts. It didn't matter, to many of them, that they were married and their husbands were Percy's acquaintances and peers, the women practically threw themselves at him and he just wanted to be away from all this. They disgusted him but he was too civil to show his repugnance. The best thing to do would be to leave and work from his estate.

There was a time when all the female attention would have flattered him, but he liked to think that he had matured beyond just seeking the pleasures of the flesh. A woman had to be intellectually and morally fit to attract his attention and so far, he'd seen nothing of that among the ladies he'd met so far.

"Simon," at least they were on first name basis, "Would it be possible to request the Regent to allow me take some of the pieces back to Salisbury so I can work on them from there? Once they're ready, I'll personally escort them back to London under the highest level of security so none will be lost."

Simon rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Percy, a good number of these were bought from galleries in Europe and the travelling is what damaged them. You at least finished the ones that belong to Prince George's mother. These are newer yet more damaged because of being roughly handled while being brought over from Europe. How will you ensure that they don't get destroyed further?"

"It's easy. Studying under Monsieur Atelier wasn't all about painting and drawing, but also about preserving priceless and precious works of art. Have no fear, these will be in good hands and I can then work on them without too much disturbance back at home. This place is good," he looked around the large room that had been put at his disposal, "But with people walking in and out every few minutes, I'm getting quite distracted. No wonder then that this is taking me too long to finish."

"I see what you mean," Simon nodded. "This place can be a little bit intimidating for someone who wants to work seriously. Everyone is celebrating the downfall of Napoleon and his exile to Elba it's an excuse to cavort and party as if the world is ending. Well," he stood

before one of the large paintings that Percy had finished restoring. "If you can promise me that no harm will come to these paintings then I'll speak to the Regent and you should then be able to return home."

"I ask for nothing more," Percy bowed to his peer. Though they were both dukes, Simon was older than Percy and also very morally upright. He was one of the few people that Percy liked, admired and respected because even though he was very close to the Regent, he had one wife and no mistresses, something really rare and surprising among the nobility. Simon loved his quiet and gentle wife and never spent a night apart from her, not for any reason. He would spend his days at the Regent's courts but each evening, would retire to his London residence where his beautiful wife would be waiting for him.

Percy had met Lady Henrietta and found her delightful. She'd even asked him to call her Henrie and he often thought about her with a lot of affection. He'd once joked to Simon that had they met Henrie at the same time, he would have won her affections and married her. Simon was truly the envy of many of his peers. An invitation to a ball or tea from Henrie was an honour indeed and many people sought her friendship. Henrie was outgoing but also very reserved when it came to her inner circle. Very few people made it to actually be termed as her friends and she didn't bother about the rumours the nasty tongued people spread. She was her own woman and Percy greatly admired her.

"In that case, give me one or two hours to find out from The Regent if what you ask can be done and I'll be back."

"Thank you, Simon."

The Duke's Return

For some reason, the twins seemed to be in an excitable mood that particular morning. For one, they'd woken up much earlier than usual and hurried with their breakfast. They also asked if they could have their lessons in the drawing room but she was now regretting having agreed to that. One or the other kept running to the front door, where they would press their ears against it as if listening for something, then return to the drawing room where they would pretend to study. This went on for a while before Penny closed the books and gave them her most stern look.

"What's going on with you two? You're not concentrating on your studies at all."

"Uncle Percy is coming back today," Aurie said. "We're listening for his carriage."

Penny was surprised because George had told her nothing of the sort. Neither Marion nor Ella and Naomi had indicated that their master was on his way back but then they were always prepared. Somehow, each day was much less the same as the one before. They would cook and clean as if their master was appearing that very day. Even when he didn't turn up, they weren't daunted but did the same thing the next day. She marvelled at their resilience and understood why they were precious to the household.

"Who told you that? George?"

The twins shook their heads and it was Eddie who spoke up. "We just know. Uncle Percy is coming back today."

"Well, then shall we proceed with our lessons until his arrival?" She didn't want the children to feel that she was doubting their word. They'd been good little children and had hardly given her any trouble, apart from their nightmares and fears that their beloved uncle wouldn't be coming back.

“Miss Campbell, can we go and do our lessons on the lawn?”

“I would really love for us to do that, Aurie, but it looks like it might rain and the air outside is a little chilly. It would be terrible for you to get the sniffles and have to stay in bed and miss seeing your uncle when he arrives.”

That seemed to calm them down a little bit, but not for long.

“Listen,” Eddie held up his small hand and Penny smiled. One day, he would command the respect of many people and he already had the confidence to do it. Much as he was playful, he must have been told by his grandmother and mother that he would one day be the Duke of Salisbury. The twins were highly intelligent and she’d come to love them so much.

“What is it, Eddie?”

“That’s Uncle Percy’s carriage,” he announced and stood up. “Please can we go and wait for him out on the front porch?”

Seeing that she was fighting a losing battle in trying to get the children to calm down, Penny decided to indulge them. “Put on your coats, mittens and scarves and we can go and wait out on the front lawn.”

When she opened the door, a blast of cold air hit her and she was glad she’d insisted on the children dressing up warmly.

“There!” Eddie pointed at a speck in the distance. Penny could see a carriage coming down the long driveway but it wasn’t until it got to halfway that she realized that indeed, it was the duke’s conveyance vehicle.

“How did you two know that your uncle was coming?” She looked from one to the other but they were too busy jumping up and down to pay attention to her words.

Percy looked towards the manor and saw his niece and nephew jumping up and down on the front porch, barely being restrained by the governess and a warm feeling came over him. This was home and the feeling of returning to those he loved overwhelmed him. He blinked rapidly to dispel the tears that threatened to fall. He and Bernard had done the same thing each time their parents or

grandparents travelled. They would wait on the front porch, too excited to settle down.

When the carriage stopped, he opened the door and stepped out. He saw the governess struggling to hold the children back from running down the steps but soon gave up. Suddenly, the two came charging down the steps, screaming at the top of their voices and he braced himself for the onslaught.

“Uncle Percy, Uncle Percy,” they chanted and he could see the joy on their faces. When they got closer, he went down on one knee and opened his arms wide to receive them.

Holding their little bodies close gave him a feeling that he couldn’t explain and he looked up at the governess, a grateful look on his face. It was clear that the children had gotten along well with her and when they were all calm, he rose to his feet, took their hands and led them towards the house. They skipped beside him like little lambs and he smiled.

Penny swallowed deeply. She’d been so moved at the duke’s reception of his charges and she fell in love with him even more. He was a good man and seeing the children in his arms made her long for things she couldn’t explain. When he got close, she curtsied.

“Welcome home, your grace.”

“A man can take many journeys away from home just to return and receive such a warm reception, Miss Penelope,” he bowed slightly.

George stepped out of the house and bowed to his master. “George, there are some paintings which need to be handled very delicately. Leonard is seeing to them. They are to be conveyed to my studio with the utmost care,” he smiled at the elderly man. “It’s good to see you again. As well, there are gifts for everyone and you should easily identify each by the name on the different packages.”

“Welcome home, your grace.”

“Even for us, Uncle Percy?” Edgar’s eager little face looked up at him.

“Of course,” he laughed and ruffled the boy’s hair. He felt as proud as a father when he looked at the healthy children.

The other servants were all lined up along the hallway to receive their master and Penny noticed that Percy called them all by name. No wonder that they were so loyal to him, she thought. He really cared about his people even though he'd been duke for a very short time.

"Come, Miss Penelope and tell me what these little rascals have been up to while I was gone."

"Uncle Percy, we were so good. Miss Campbell told us so and said she would tell you that we were good children."

Something nagged at the back of Percy's mind but he soon forgot what it was when the children called for his attention. He led them to the study and sat on the couch, not caring that they were draped all over him. "Miss Penelope, do come in and stop hovering in the doorway."

"Thank you, your grace."

Eddie and Aurie chatted nonstop for a while but finally they ran out of steam and folded like a pack of cards. "These little ones must be really exhausted."

"They are," Penny said in a quiet voice. "From the day you left, they haven't slept well."

"Why?"

"They kept asking me if you would ever return. In the past few months, they've been through so much, losing their parents and grandparents. When you went away, they must have felt that you were also leaving them."

Percy stared at Penny and then it suddenly dawned on him what had been nagging him. "Do you perchance own a rose garden?"

She blushed and he knew that he had his answer. "No matter, so you're not the governess that was supposed to come from London?"

"No, your grace," she shook her head. "The lady never showed up so I stayed to take care of the children. But now I think it's time for me to return to my cottage." And my dismal lonely life, she added silently.

“Don’t you think they will feel abandoned when they wake up to find you gone? Haven’t you just told me that they haven’t been sleeping well since I left? They seem to have formed a strong attachment to you and if you leave them now, think of the effect that would have on them.”

“But I’m not their governess.”

“You could be. What if I offered you some more money to help me take care of my brother’s children, would you do that for me?”

“It’s not about the money,” she said.

“What would stop you from taking up this post? You’ve lived here for the past two weeks and I’m sure no one ill treated you. Please consider taking care of my niece and nephew, if not for my sake then for theirs?”

“Your sake?”

“Yes. The Regent wanted me to carry on doing restoration work but I felt that I’d been away too long and so asked if I could come and work from here. I’ve brought back a number of paintings to work on and that means I’ll be very busy for the next few days. Many of the pieces are quite intricate and call for the highest levels of concentration. I can’t do that if I’m also breaking in a new governess. Eddie and Aurie don’t easily take to strangers and seeing how happy and well they seem makes me know that you’re a gem,” he gave her a gentle smile.

Penny blushed again, his words warming her and she found herself agreeing.

“Good then, now can you help me get these little ones up to their beds?”

“Yes, your grace.”

Cosy Domestic Scene

Penny carried out her usual routine with the children that night. After their dinner, she read to them, and once they dropped off, she tidied the room up and sat for a while watching them as they slept. She'd done this every night since their uncle went to London and she became their governess.

Even though Lord Percival was back, she couldn't be sure that they would sleep without having nightmares. So once again, she would watch over them tonight to make sure they were fine.

There was a brief knock and thinking that it was George, bid him enter. He usually brought her a cup of tea each night. But this time, however, it wasn't George who came into the nursery.

"Your grace," she rose to her feet and curtsied.

"Why are you here instead of downstairs taking dinner with me?"

"I was worried about Aurie and Eddie. As I told you before, they've had nightmares since you went away and I just wanted to make sure that they were fine."

Percy walked up and stood between the children's beds, looking down at them. His heart constricted when he thought about their distress. He turned to Penny. "From here and now, I promise that if I have to leave home for any reason at all, it will be with these two. They're not the only ones who suffered through the separation," he shook his head. "I love these children so much and the thought that they were distressed at my absence makes me really sad."

"I'm sorry, your grace."

"You did a good job and this is as good time as any to discuss your wages. George told me that you refused to take any money from him. Why is that?"

"I was only covering for their governess until she arrived so I didn't think that I deserved to be paid. After all, I live in one of the cottages on this estate and have never paid rent. Neither did my grandmother for all the years that she lived there after my grandfather died. Your family has been so good to mine and it didn't seem right for me to take wages from you."

"Miss Campbell, don't be such a martyr. You did a good job with the twins and deserve compensation of some sort. In the two weeks that you've been here, George tells me that the children were on their best behaviour and with no pretense. You're good for them and for that, I'd like to settle what I owe you. Then, we can work out your wages from here on."

Penny wanted to argue but she didn't want to offend the duke. After all, she lived rent free on his estate and his word was law around here.

"So, Miss Campbell, tell me something, have you had your dinner yet?"

"I usually eat with the children."

"But I don't like dining alone so would you please join me downstairs?"

She didn't want the other servants thinking that she was taking advantage of her position as governess to ensconce herself into the duke's life. That could create some awkwardness between them in future.

Percy could see the indecision on her face and sought to reassure her. "It's just dinner and in any case, you'll be giving me an update on the children's progress since I left. What do you say?"

"When put like that, it makes sense."

"Good." He walked back to the children's beds, bent down and kissed their foreheads. "They look so peaceful and yet can be really mischievous."

"But they're really wonderful children."

"Of that, dear lady, I have no doubt."

Tired after spending some very energetic moments at the banks of the River Nadder trying to catch fish, Aurie and Eddie flopped onto the mat and stretched out in the sun. Penny giggled at the expressions of utter bliss on their little faces. As promised, she'd brought them to the beach only this time to fish and frolic around. That they were having a lot of fun was quite evident in the amount of stones and small shells they'd gathered along the banks of the river. They were yet to catch any fish but they didn't really care. It was their day at the beach or riverbank and that's all that mattered to them.

"What did I miss?" Percy's deep voice spoke from above Penny's head and she looked up. "These two seem to have had a really good time," he sat down beside her on the mat Marion had provided for their picnic and stretched his long legs. "What a peaceful spot, how did you find it?"

"Grandma and I used to come here a lot when she was still alive. She taught me how to fish and I thought the children needed a lesson in that too."

"You must have loved her very much," he observed her, noting the sadness on her face.

"She was all I had when my parents died after falling ill with tuberculosis. Grandma took care of me and taught me all that I know including how to make soap and perfumes."

"Are you the one who's been supplying my household with scented soap?"

"Yes, your grace."

"You seem to be a lady of diverse talents and I'm just glad that you're taking the time to impart some of your knowledge to my little relatives here."

"Grandma always used to say that whatever we receive for free, we should pass it on to others. I also learnt how to make candles but obtaining wax is very difficult."

“Why? My estate has a number of hives and you can get as much wax as you need.”

“That is very kind of you, sir, but right now I have to concentrate on the children’s needs before anything else.”

“Not necessarily,” he smiled as Eddie climbed onto his lap and immediately fell asleep. Not wanting to be left out, Aurie snuggled on Penny’s lap and also fell asleep. “These children are really interesting. Are they sleeping better?”

“Much, much better now that you’re home.”

“Good,” he settled the child in his arms comfortably. “As I as saying, you don’t have to give up your passion because you’re taking care of the twins. We could come up with a schedule that gives each of us some free time to pursue other interests. I have my studio and the manor has many unoccupied rooms. I’ll ask George and Leonard to prepare one for you. In that way, you can escape to your sanctuary for a few hours each day while I watch the children.”

“I don’t want to impose on your kindness and generosity, your grace.”

“Nonsense, that’s not imposing. Besides, this house needs plenty of candles because we don’t like darkness. In days past, mother would put candles all over the place and one servant had to make sure that they didn’t go out all night. I always say that someone should invent the kind of candle that will burn for the longest time and no servant will have to spend sleepless nights keeping them on. Much like the gas lights that are now appearing all over London.”

“I believe it’s just a matter of time before we can have gas lights in the houses too,” Penny said and Percy nodded.

“But don’t let people hear you speak of such matters,” he grinned at her. “Most folk imagine that women have no sense in their heads and are only good as wives and mothers. If they hear a woman speaking about grand matters such as lighting, they automatically assume that she’s deranged.”

“That’s what my grandmother used to say, that a woman should always remain silent even when she knows the subject matter being

discussed. According to my grandmother, if a woman exhibited intelligence, she would never find a man to marry her.”

“From the indignation in your voice, I take it that you don’t agree with that.”

“Honestly, I don’t. Look at the twins, for example. I know for a fact that Aurie is a highly intelligent little girl and were she in some other household, would be really frustrated. She loves learning, is curious and asks very many questions. Whatever Eddie does, she tries to match up or even do better. When she grows up and if she’s still allowed to be herself, she’ll be a very intelligent woman who will be of great benefit to her family and even England. But I know that at some point, people will begin to frown upon her character and term her as overly bold and all that rubbish.”

Percy smiled, “You remind me of Henrie.”

“Who’s Henrie?”

“She’s the dear wife of a good friend of mine. Henrie insists that a woman can be intelligent and still be a good wife and mother. You know how families look forward to coming out seasons for their daughters because that’s how they’re able to meet good young men for marriage? Well, Henrie refused to attend any such balls in her day saying that it was against all that she believed in. She met Simon at an art gallery and nothing her parents could say would make her change her mind. Of course, she had no idea he was a duke then but that didn’t matter at all to her.” He smiled as he fondly remembered his friends. “Henrie has a way of staring at a person that makes them feel, shall I say, foolish? Her inner circle is very small and she picks her friends with utmost care. You won’t find women who visit her talking about their crocheting or how to mind babies or how to make their husbands happy or which candles give the most light. They talk about current affairs, discuss whatever is happening in parliament, follow world news and all that. I think you and she would get along very well.”

Penny blushed because that was high praise indeed. “That’s a very nice thing to say.”

“And I really mean it. Look at how well adjusted my niece and nephew are becoming and it’s all thanks to you. I’ve lived in Paris

for many years, spent a lot of time in London and one thing is for sure. The world is changing and so are the women who live in it, but they can only do so confidently if we as men and the society too allow them.”

Later that evening, as he sat in his study brooding over some bills, Percy decided that it was time for him to find an estate manager. He needed enough time to work on his paintings because a number of them were supposed to be delivered to their owners. And he also had the Regent’s work to complete. But now, he was caught up in checking the tenants’ records, making follow ups with those who owed money and settling bills. It was quite cumbersome and time consuming, yet he could be doing something else that was more important. Bernard had never employed a manager because he’d loved doing everything by himself and besides, Genevieve had been there to assist him.

But Percy was different; he didn’t like dealing with such matters that he considered trivial. If only Penny wasn’t so busy with the children he might have asked her to do it. She was highly intelligent and he’d really meant it when he told her she would get along very well with Henrie. She reminded him of his mother and grandmother who had been well informed and as his father would often tease them, they were modern day broads.

He’d loved spending the day with Penny and the children at the riverbank and promised himself that he would find ways of doing so more often. That she loved the little ones was quite evident and he thought that she would one day make some man a good wife and wonderful mother. Then the thought of her being married to another man and sharing laughter with him twisted his insides and he put the many papers away. Standing up, he walked to the windows even though he could see nothing through the thick drapes. The house was silent and he assumed everyone was in bed and sleeping peacefully.

Perhaps as his mother had said before her death, it was time for him to find a wife who would help him bring his brother’s children up. The only problem he had was that none of the noble women he knew for miles around was quite what he was looking for. He attended balls like any other young male searching for a life partner but found the women too frivolous or artificial. They were clearly

out to ensnare some poor man, wear his ring and bear his children. They would then go on to become matronly, some growing fat because there was no need for them to continue trying to look attractive. After all, hadn't they already found themselves husbands? There was no more need to make an effort to remain pretty.

Percy had stopped wondering why a good number of his counterparts kept mistresses. According to them, their wives had become boring, just talking about children, how to run their households and gossiping about other women. The wives did nothing to challenge their husbands' intellect and sometimes all a man wanted to do was talk. When he couldn't get a sympathetic ear from his wife, he was prepared to pay another woman to listen to him.

He'd seen his own parents' marriage and how they'd stayed in love for years. To his knowledge, his father never had a single mistress because his mother was the perfect wife for him. That was the kind of love he wanted, pure, strong and abiding. But he doubted that he would find it with some woman who'd been brought up believing that her life constituted of a husband and children and nothing else. He wanted more and was prepared to wait for the right woman to come along, not just for his sake, but for the sake of his niece and nephew.

"Someone like Miss Penelope Campbell," a little voice whispered into his ear and he found himself smiling at that thought.

Mademoiselle Benoit

The visitor when she arrived caught everyone by surprise and especially Percy. “Marie?” He stood up from the lawn chair on which he’d been seated, taking one of the rare breaks that his work afforded him. The sun had also decided to bless them with a rare appearance given that autumn was fast approaching. So, Penny had brought the children out to play and they’d been having a wonderful time before the carriage arrived. He watched as a footman helped her down from the carriage.

“Oh Percival,” the petite and elegant woman rushed towards him, flung herself into his arms and rattled off a string of French words that had the children and Penny staring at her with a lot of curiosity. She looked like a little delicate bird and Penny wanted to rush towards her and pull her away from Percy, but not before scratching her eyes out.

Then she checked her thoughts and sighed inwardly. Of course, Percy had lived in France for a long time and this woman seemed very close with him. Though she didn’t like to gossip, she’d been curious about her employer but the servants were too loyal to tell her much. She’d been curious about any women who might have been in his life but no one told her anything. Seeing the way Marie was clinging on to Lord Percival made Penny feel that they had been really close at some point in their lives.

Percy wished he could put Marie back on the carriage and send her back to France but she seemed quite distraught and he was forced to listen to her. He knew that she was deliberately speaking French so that no one else could understand what she was saying. In between all the chattering, Percy kept nodding but finally she fell silent.

Percy turned to look at Penny, catching a blank look on her face and he sighed inwardly. She had a very expressive face and seeing

her now made him realize that she was hiding her real emotions.

“Marie,” he spoke in English for the sake of the children and Penny, “I’d like you to meet my niece and nephew, Aurelia and Edgar. Children, this is Miss Marie Benoit, my very good friend, or as we would say it in French, Mademoiselle Benoit.”

Eddie executed the perfect bow as taught by his uncle, and Aurie curtsied delightfully.

“Oh Percy, they’re such delightful children. I’ll enjoy teaching them so much. We’ll be good friends, you’ll see,” she patted their heads like one would a litter of puppies then turned back to him and raised her face. “I’m so happy you’re allowing me to stay here. Percy, I was so scared and terrified.”

“Marie, please meet Miss Penelope Campbell, the children’s governess.”

Apart from casting a disinterested look her way, Marie practically ignored Penny and the latter merely shrugged. She shouldn’t expect anything from Percy’s guests seeing as she was merely the governess.

“I’m so tired and weary, Percival, can you show me my rooms so I can rest? It was a distressful journey and I thought they would catch me,” she said. “You don’t know how it feels to be so scared and in a foreign country. But I knew that my Percival would protect me and take good care of me.”

Percy nodded, gave an apologetic look to Penny and led the woman inside even as George and Leonard carried her numerous cases inside.

“Silly Marie,” Aurie said and then giggled.

“What?” Penny frowned at her.

“Uncle Percy said her name is Silly Marie.”

“No he did not,” she told the child firmly. “She’s Mademoiselle Marie.”

“Silly Marie,” Eddie repeated and the giggled. The children sobered up when Penny gave them both a stern look.

“Don’t be disrespectful to your uncle’s guest. If you can’t call her anything else then just refer to her as Miss Benoit.”

“Yes, Miss Campbell,” they said soberly enough but she could see from their eyes that they were anything but humbled. Sighing inwardly, she just hoped they wouldn’t call the woman that to her face and have their uncle come down on them. He would also probably blame her if their manners were wanting.

“Well, let’s go to the nursery and do some of our lessons.”

“Yes, Miss Campbell.”

* * *

“Marie, why are you here?” Percy asked once they were in the study. He’d showed her to her rooms and expected her to remain resting but she followed him back to the study.

“Percival, aren’t you glad to see me? I missed you so much. You left Paris so abruptly without saying goodbye,” she pouted and he felt slightly irritated. At some point in his life, he’d been crazy enough to imagine that he was in love with Marie Benoit. But not anymore! While the French woman was elegant and really beautiful, his heart now belonged to some little English governess who was probably upstairs with his niece and nephew.

Just how it had happened, he had no idea but in the few days that he’d been back from London, he found himself looking forward to seeing her each day. Of course, the children barely gave her time to do much else but whenever he was free, he would find himself walking up to the nursery to spend time with the three of them. His pretext was that he was making sure that the children were learning whatever lessons were relevant for them, and that they were behaving well.

* * *

“Of course, I’m glad to see you, Marie. Still, it’s interesting that you

should seek me out seeing as the last time we saw each other was nearly five years ago just before I moved to Lille.” He gave her a tight smile. “You’re still as beautiful as ever but right now there’s some very sensitive and important work that I’m doing and I’m sorry to have to tell you that I might not be a very good host.”

“Oh Percival, it doesn’t matter. This will be my home and I know how to make myself comfortable. You don’t have to worry about me at all and I thank you for allowing me to stay here a few days. You won’t even notice that I’m here.”

He somehow doubted that very much but he’d already said yes to her staying. Marie was an attention seeker and he hoped her coming here wouldn’t interfere with his work. “Very well then, but should you need anything, please let one of the servants know. I’ll be sequestered in my studio for long periods of time, but I promise to try and make some time for you.”

“May I see what you’re working on, Percival?”

He shook his head. Aside from the fact that he didn’t like distractions while he was working, these pieces that he’d brought back from London were so sensitive and a few quite personal to the Regent. Simon had made him promise that they would never be exposed to other eyes other than his own. “You know how I never show my work to anyone until it’s quite done. That way, I don’t get angry when people try to make suggestions as to how I should be doing it.”

“I promise to be very discreet and not to offer unwanted suggestions.”

Percy smiled but shook his head once again and his words were very firm. “My work is important to me, Marie. There are many other paintings around the manor that you can look at if you so wish. Please respect my wishes for privacy at least for now,” he finished, to remove the sting from his words.

She sighed dramatically, “I guess I have to obey your wishes, my lord.”

“Very well then, this afternoon I can give you a few minutes of my time. There are a number of invitations to various balls around the

countryside. Would you like to attend any of them?”

“Oh Percival,” she clapped her hands with joy, “That would be wonderful.”

“Good. What I’ll do is have Atkins my new estate manager show you what has come in and you can then select the ones that would interest you. While I may be able to accompany you to a few of them, it won’t be possible for me to go to all. What do you think?”

She entwined her fingers with his and smiled suggestively. “You’re every wish is my command,” she said coyly. “You know that I live to please you, my lord.”

Once upon a time, he might have acted on his baser instincts but now he was a guardian and striving to be responsible for Eddie and Aurie’s sake. He also couldn’t imagine desecrating his family home by indulging in the pleasures of the flesh under the roof where his parents and grandparents had lived. They deserved better and this was an honourable home.

“You’re a very beautiful woman and the offer is highly tempting, but I have work to do. Shall I give you a brief tour of the gardens? Miss Campbell has a good hand when it comes to flowers and she’s been helping George and the gardener turn this once barren patch of land into a flower garden. Come and see what they’ve managed to achieve so far.”

* * *

From the window up in the nursery which overlooked the garden that she’d started working on with George and Gus the Swedish gardener, Penny watched as Percy and Marie strolled arm in arm. She was jealous and wanted to scream because of the unfairness of it all.

In the past few days since Percy had been back, she’d built an illusion around their lives. That she was his wife and took care of the twins while he worked. Then he would come and spend his free moments with them and she would imagine that they were a happy family.

“Stupid dreams,” she muttered.

“Miss Campbell, did you say something?” Eddie hailed her from across the room.

“No, my love. I was trying to compose a little song that I’ll teach you then we can sing to your uncle and his guest.’

“Silly Marie might not like English music. The French are picky like that,” Aurie said.

“And who told you such a thing?”

Aurie shrugged her little shoulders. “I just know.”

Penny turned back to watch the two love birds as they continued with their stroll in the cool gardens. At one point, Percy looked up at the nursery windows and she shrank back, even though she knew he couldn’t see her because of the sheers. Her heart was beating rapidly and she went to sit down with the children at their lesson table.

They were painting today and she could see that Aurie was taking after her uncle. Already, she could paint really pretty flowers. Eddie’s drawings were more of animals which looked like fat blobs mounted on sticks.

“Miss Campbell, we’re running out of paint,” Aurie called her attention to their present situation. “Can we get some from Uncle Percy’s studio?”

“No, my darlings. Uncle Percy said no one should go to his studio when he wasn’t there.”

“But he’s there now,” Aurie insisted. “We can go and check.”

Penny shook her head. “Your uncle is showing Miss Marie around the garden, go and see for yourselves,” she waved a hand in the direction of the window.

The children stopped whatever they were doing and rushed to the window. “There’s Silly Marie holding Uncle Percy’s hand,” Edgar’s tone was indignant. “I want to go to the garden and walk with my uncle,” he said haughtily and didn’t even wait for Penny to say a word. He rushed out of the nursery, Aurie hard on his heels. Penny

knew she would get into trouble for allowing the children to interrupt the romantic promenade but some little part of her wanted it broken up.

So she followed the children outside and watched as they each took their uncle's hands, separating him from Marie. Percy looked towards the house briefly and Penny shrugged as if to say, 'I had no control over the situation.'

Marie was clearly irritated and he saw the flash of annoyance mar her face briefly then she turned all sweet and friendly. When Percy looked towards the door again, Penny was gone. He wondered what she was thinking about this whole issue of Marie staying at the manor for a few days. Somehow, he found himself wanting to explain things to her so she wouldn't feel hurt.

* * *

"So this is where you come to hide," Percy's voice startled Penny out of her thoughts.

"How did you find me?" Her face was turned away from him and the stiffness in her shoulders told him that he'd intruded into a private moment. "I'm sorry, your grace," she stood up and curtsied but still kept her face turned away.

Percy walked up to her and raised her chin, turning her face towards him. "Tears, Miss Campbell? Has something bad happened to you that I should know of?"

"No," she tried to pull away but he held fast. "I just needed some time to myself. Please pardon me for neglecting my duties. I'll go and attend to the children right away."

"No need to hurry, they were so tired after the long walk we took and fell asleep while taking their lunch. They're in bed now and I came to find out why you weren't there for lunch."

"I wasn't feeling hungry," she murmured.

"Does this have anything to do with Marie Benoit?"

She frowned and finally pulled her chin away and stood up, putting as much distance between them as she could. "I don't know what you mean," she said in a low voice.

"Oh but you do, dear girl. From the moment the carriage that brought Marie arrived on this estate, your countenance changed. Marie is an old friend and needs my help for now. Her father is dead and since he wasn't quite popular, people turned on her. She had to get away from Paris or be harmed. Is it such a bad thing for me to offer her refuge here for a few days?"

"It's not in my place to judge and I'm sorry if my actions seemed that way. This is the month that I lost my grandmother and it hurts just thinking about it."

"I'm sorry," Percy took her in his arms and though she resisted at first, soon gave in to the feeling of gentleness radiating from his person. "Please forgive me for berating you and yet you're in pain. You can take the rest of the afternoon off and go wherever you wish. Between the other servants, Marie and I, we'll be able to take care of the children."

"Thank you." She felt glad because she'd been desiring to return to the cottage and check on her flowers and ensure that all was well. George, bless his kind heart, had made it a habit to visit her cottage each day and he told her things were alright. But she needed some time away from the manor. "I promise to be back soon," she said, as she left him and walked towards the house.

Percy had a troubled look on his face as he watched Penny walking away. He felt that she was hiding something from him and he had a feeling that it all had to do with Marie. Groaning inwardly, he returned to the house and was surprised to see Marie walking down the hallway towards his grandmother's rooms. Without alerting her to his presence, he followed and when he got there, was surprised to find the room empty. "Perhaps it was all an illusion," he thought, but he was so sure he'd seen her and could even smell the faint scent of her perfume.

"Odd, very odd," he thought, returning to his studio.

Marie Benoit had a very shrewd look in her eyes as she remained concealed behind the large drapes in the dowager duchess's bedchamber. She'd seen Percy following her but pretended not to and managed to slip away just in time. She held her breath until he'd left the room and then she let it out again.

"Homme insense," she muttered before slipping out of the room once she was sure he'd gone.

Feelings of Jealousy

"I can't continue to stay here," Penny thought to herself as she went to bed three nights later. Percy and Marie had gone out to attend a ball at a neighbour's house and she felt really jealous. "It's only a matter of time before all these feelings overwhelm me and I make a fool of myself. I have to leave before I humiliate myself and bring shame on the children that I love so much."

Her love for Percy was causing her to become irrational and irritable, which wasn't good for the children. They deserved someone who didn't have her head up in the clouds. She'd heard Marion and Ella whispering that wedding bells were in the air. Apparently, Percy and Marie had been deeply in love while he lived in Paris. He'd even brought her to meet his family years ago but something had happened to separate them. Now they were reunited and their loved seemed to have been rekindled. According to the servants, Percy was happier than he'd been in a long time which was a good thing and any time now, they would be announcing their engagement.

Well, she wasn't going to be around for that and the sooner she left, the better for everyone concerned. Thinking about leaving the children she'd come to love so much made her sick to her stomach but what else was she to do? She could stay and pretend that all was well but sooner or later, the mask would slip and her true feelings would show.

The next morning she was no brighter but had to concentrate on the children's needs.

"Miss Campbell, will you please do my hair?" Aurie stood before her with her pretty pink ribbons in her hand. "I want to look smart for Uncle Percy."

"Of course, I will," and she brushed the little girl's hair and tied it in two pony tails. "There, you're all smart now. Where's Eddie?"

Aurie shrugged. "I don't know," she said, but Penny was sure she was hiding something.

"Aurie, what is your brother up to? If you cause any trouble, your uncle will be really....." A scream or more like a screech interrupted her speech and she rushed out of the nursery and down the stairs. It sounded like Marie Benoit and because her bedroom was just below the nursery. The woman had indicated that she had a knee problem and couldn't climb the stairs, so Percy allowed her to use his grandmother's bedchamber. In any case, the rooms were empty and she was harming no one by staying there.

That was where Penny headed with Aurie following her. They got there the same time that Percy did.

"What's going on?" He stepped into the room to find Marie standing in her night gown. The moment she saw him, threw herself in his arms and sobbed.

"That thing," she pointed towards the bed and Percy sighed inwardly. There was a small toad on Marie's pillow and he guessed that his nephew had something to do with it. "Get it out of here," she sobbed. "I can't sleep in this room anymore, Percival. Take me to your room, take me away from here."

When Penny saw what had caused all the commotion, she knew that trouble had come calling in the early morning. No wonder that Aurie had been quite elusive when asked where her brother was.

"Marie, calm down," he said. "It's only a small toad but I'll have George deal with it. Your bed linens will be changed and the room will be thoroughly cleaned so it will be as good as new. I think this little critter must have slipped in when you left your window opened. You're on the ground floor and that happens a lot since there's a small stream at the end of the garden. We've had toads straying into the manor whenever it rains, which is why we never leave the windows on the ground floor open."

"Oh Percival, I was so scared," she shivered and pressed closer. "I'm so cold but that thing is lying on my dressing gown."

"No matter," Percy picked up a shawl that was carelessly draped over one of the chairs and wrapped her in it. "Now, I need you to

calm down, everything will be alright.”

Penny watched all the drama with something like amusement on her face but had to wipe the expression off when Percy turned to look at her. “Come child, let’s go and find your brother,” she took Aurie’s hand and they went out of Marie’s room.

Eddie was innocently taking his breakfast but Penny wasn’t fooled. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” he took a bite of his toast. “Miss Campbell, have you seen Mr. Croak? I searched for him everywhere in the nursery but he was gone.” Mr. Croak was the toad that had been majestically sitting on Marie’s pillow, the cause of all the trouble.

“Don’t mention that in your uncle’s presence,” Penny hissed and then glared at Aurie when she giggled. “Your uncle will be very cross that you upset his guest. Now, take your breakfast and let’s leave before he comes.”

But Percy strode into the dining room a few minutes later. “Miss Campbell, a word with you please,” his face looked really stern and her heart sank.

“Your grace,” she got up, gave the children a final warning look and then followed Percy to his study.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t get smart with me, Miss Penelope Campbell. I have a lot of work to do and appeasing a highly hysterical female isn’t something I care to do right now. What did my nephew do?”

“I don’t think Eddie had anything to do with that frog being in Miss Benoit’s bedchamber. The frog must have entered in through the window.”

“It’s a toad, Miss Campbell. If I’m not wrong, that small critter belongs to my nephew and for it to have found its way into Marie’s room makes me wonder if perhaps you had something to do with the whole incident.”

Penny was too stunned to speak for a moment. “How dare you!”

"You're the governess and as such, I expect you to keep those children in check at all times especially when we have guests. You've done a poor job so far and this morning I'm extremely upset. Now, go up to the nursery and collect all other animals and birds and get them out of this house at once. Do I make myself clear?"

"But...."

"Don't talk back at me, Miss Campbell. I'm barely holding on to my temper. Get up there and get rid of every critter that boy owns. I don't want to see them in this house. You should have done a better job and I'm really disappointed in you."

Penny felt really angry at the duke's reaction though she also felt that he was justified. It was after all her duty to make sure that the children were on their best behaviour at all times. But it stung that Percy would think she was the one who'd enabled Eddie to let the frog loose in Marie's bedchamber.

"I'll do better," she said in a cold voice. "Consider my services to you and your household ended. If that's how you think of me, I'm leaving this house and never coming back," and she walked out of the study with her head held high. She wouldn't cry, not in front of Percy or the children. Since she had very few things in the manor, she slipped out of the house through the kitchen and made her way back to her cottage. Marion could pack whatever belonged to her and send them to her at the cottage but she wasn't setting foot in the manor again.

"I might not be here for long anyway," she spoke to one of her rose bushes sometime later as she trimmed it, tears coursing down her face. "This cottage belongs to the duke and I've angered him."

* * *

The moment Penny walked out of the study, Percy knew he was in trouble. But he had to make his niece and nephew understand that pulling pranks such as the one Eddie had done wasn't acceptable at all.

"Where's Miss Campbell?" He asked George a few minutes later. He

didn't think she was serious about leaving employment and thought she was just being dramatic. He sighed inwardly, dealing with feminine theatrics wasn't something he wanted to do. What a morning!

"She's gone, your grace."

"What do you mean gone?"

"Miss Campbell left the manor, sir, and I believe she's returned to her cottage."

"Where are the children?"

"Back in the nursery."

Percy's lips tightened and he nodded. "Let me check on the children first," and ran up the stairs to the nursery. The angry words died on his lips when he found Eddie and Aurie huddled together in the corner of the room. Tears were coursing down their cheeks.

"What's wrong?"

"Miss Campbell has left us," they sobbed and threw themselves into his arms. "We're sorry, Uncle Percy. It wasn't her fault," Edgar said. "Mr. Croak was thirsty and wanted some water so I took him out of his jar and he ran away. I followed him but he slipped under Miss Marie's door and I didn't want to disturb her so I decided to wait until she woke up."

"Is that what happened, Aurie?"

"Yes, Uncle Percy. Miss Campbell tells us to take good care of our pets. You were so cross with her and she left us."

"Eddie, calm down. Miss Campbell has gone to check on something at her cottage but she'll be back."

"No, we heard her saying she was never coming back," more sobs and it took Percy nearly an hour to calm the twins down. If this was a precursor to the days to come, he was in trouble. He was going to have to grovel and beg Miss Campbell to return.

"Miss Campbell was only jesting. Now, wipe your tears and let's go to the cottage to find Miss Campbell and bring her back."

The cheerful smiles made Percy feel hopeful. He didn't dare go alone for Penny might not give him an audience. The children were his screen and he knew that she wouldn't be able to resist their sad faces.

* * *

"What are you doing here?" Penny looked up at Percy, her eyes flashing. He'd found her in the rose garden and she felt at a disadvantage because of her clothes. "Have you come to ask me to vacate the cottage? Have no fear, I have plans to do just that."

"Miss Campbell, I came to say that I'm sorry. Eddie and Aurie explained everything to me and I now understand that it wasn't your fault. Mr. Croak, as Eddie tells me, slipped away from him and ran into Miss Benoit's room. No one is at fault and I humbly ask for your forgiveness."

Penny wanted to say yes and rush back to the manor but it would just be delaying the inevitable. She'd already decided to leave because of the duke's upcoming nuptials.

"I'm sorry but I've decided to go to London and take up another post."

"Penny," she was surprised when he called her that for he'd never done it before. "Please don't do this to me, to the children. How am I supposed to explain to them that you won't come back? Think of the devastating consequences."

"Your grace, no one is indispensable in this life. People come and go and we have to live with the changes that happen. My mind is made up, please don't ask me again."

Percy knew that Penny was hurt and he did something quite unthinkable. Pulling her into his arms, he gave her a kiss that shook her to the core. She responded at first but then began to struggle to be free. He finally let her go.

"Why did you do that?" She said breathlessly, moving to the other side of the garden.

“Because you’re a very beautiful woman and I wanted to do it. Now, can we talk rationally and not with our tempers running high?”

“Your grace, I don’t want to come back and work in the manor.”

“You may give me all kinds of excuses but I know that your heart is with those little children.” He turned and called out. “Eddie, Aurie, come out now. Miss Penny can’t seem to make her mind up and I need your help convincing her to come back to the manor.”

“That’s not fair,” she hissed at him, watching as the twins ran towards her and flung themselves into her arms.

“I’m a desperate man, Miss Campbell,” he told her, a satisfied smirk on his face.

The House of Warren

Something woke her up and at first she thought it was just a dream so she turned over and closed her eyes, ready to fall asleep again. But then she thought she heard muffled voices. Her bedroom overlooked the back courtyard and the sounds seemed to come from below. Without any hesitation, Penny slipped out of bed. The stablemen often left one or two lanterns burning to give light and on this night there was a full moon which enabled her to clearly see the courtyard.

The darkness of her room concealed her from anyone who might look up to her window but she was still cautious not to open the heavy drapes anymore than was necessary. She was sure that she saw two heavily cloaked figures moving towards the concealed door that hardly anyone ever used. She had accidentally found it a few days ago when Eddie tossed a ball behind the flower trellis in front of it. Being the one who went after the ball, she had seen the door but quickly concealed her discovery because she hadn't wanted the children to ask her about it.

Seeing the hooded figures disappearing through that door made her wonder who else in the manor knew about that particular door. It must lead somewhere, and she intended to find out just where. People who skulked around at night slipping into houses through secret doors definitely had something to hide. This was her temporary home and family and she needed to protect and ensure that they were alright. At the moment, it didn't once occur to her to talk the matter over with Percy. Protecting him and the twins was her first priority for they meant the world to her.

Ever since he'd come to the cottage and convinced her to return to the manor, things had changed. He spent more time in the nursery with them and she would often find him observing her with his intense blue eyes. He hadn't made a move to kiss her again and she didn't quite know how she felt about all that. Touching her lips, she

closed her eyes and sighed. The man had completely turned her world upside down and she was enslaved by his love. How could she possibly leave, she thought as sleep once more claimed her.

The next day on the pretext of studying various plants, Penny took the children to the back courtyard. "Today, we're going to be looking at odd plants and flowers and how their beauty enhances the appearance of the manor." She ignored the children's curious looks. "Now, shall we go and study those plants?"

"Alright," Aurie said resignedly, picking up the small basket that Penny had provided for their investigative and educational excursion. "Let's go then, Miss Campbell."

Penny hid her smile as she followed her charges out of the nursery and down the stairs, through the kitchen and out into the back yard. They'd been looking forward to playing quietly in the nursery this morning yet here she was making them go outside. She could hear them whispering to each other, clearly wondering what was going on. "Shall we start in this area then," she pointed at a spot away from the concealed door. "Pick all the small flowers and put them in your baskets. We'll then pluck the petals and dry them and put them in between our clothes for the scent to cling to our clothes. We want our clothes to smell nice, don't we?"

"They're so many," Eddie complained. "Boys are not supposed to pick flowers."

"But you used to come and pick my roses, weren't you still a boy then?" She raised her brows at him and he gave her one of the cheeky grins that she loved. "Now, shall we proceed to pick those flowers?"

When she was sure the twins were concentrating on the flowers and not on her, she slipped through the trellis that was covered with creeping plants and knelt parting the plants growing along the wall. She saw the door, tried it but it was locked. But when she looked on the ground, she could see signs of disturbance, as if the door had been opened. Plants had been trampled upon and there was a partial footprint. That confirmed what she'd seen in the deep of the night. The door had been opened and used, and she wondered where it led to. There was only one way to find out.

“Children, I think we have enough flowers. Let’s go up to the nursery and shred the petals. Autumn is coming and we need these to dry very well so let’s hurry.”

“But I like picking flowers,” Eddie protested and Penny threw her head back and laughed. “Now you tell me,” she said. “Weren’t you the one who was just complaining a few minutes ago that boys are not supposed to pick flowers?”

Percy was just emerging from the house when he heard the soft laughter and a smile immediately broke out on his face. He spotted the three of them and walked towards them.

“You sound really happy,” he said, smiling in a way that melted Penny’s insides. “What’s going on here?”

“Uncle Percy, we’re picking flowers to put in our clothes,” Aurie held her basket up for him to see. “Miss Campbell told us our clothes will smell nice.”

“She did?” His eyes held laughter and he looked so young and carefree and she determined that nothing would ever mar that, not if she could help it.

Later that night when the children were in bed, she made her way down to the study. She knew that Percy was in his studio for he often worked late and Marie Benoit was nowhere to be found. She had to find out where that door led to and using candlelight, searched for the blue prints to the manor and its history.

The library was vast and there were hundreds of books and journals but someone had painstakingly labelled the different categories and for that she was grateful. Finding the journals of the House of Warren, she carried the heavy volumes to the couch and sank down, praying that Percy wouldn’t think to come to his study for any reason.

The manor was over one hundred years old, according to the Annals of the House of Warren even though it hadn’t always been a duchy. It had quite a rich history and as Penny pored through sheets of paper, she got more fascinated by the history of the duke’s family. There were some recent entries showing the passing on of Lord Bernard and his wife, and Percy inheriting the title. It was clear that

someone took care to keep updating the history of the family, probably Percy himself.

The duke had a rich ancestry and as she went over his family tree was quite impressed by those who'd gone before him. One thing was apparent, the four dukes before Percival had been gentlemen all through. Nowhere in their history was there any whisper of scandal or untoward behaviour. They weren't always wealthy but they had integrity and honour. The writer could be biased but she doubted it, or her grandmother would have said something when she was still alive. Having lived on the estate for many years, Grandma had known a lot about nearly everything that went on around her. Had there been a whiff of a scandal of some sort, she would most definitely have revealed it to Penny.

It was the first Duke of Salisbury, Lord Arthur Warren who'd brought the title into the family. He was Percy's great grandfather and had been a close friend of King George I. Together with others loyal to the crown, Arthur Warren had helped the monarch secure his throne from the Jacobites. They'd wanted to replace him with Queen Anne's Catholic half brother, James Francis Stuart but the Act of Settlement prohibited any Catholics from inheriting the British throne. Once his reign was secure, King George gave Arthur Warren the title of Duke of Salisbury and thus began the duchy of the House of Warren.

Before he came in to the title, however, Arthur despite being a protestant had been sympathetic to the cause of the Jacobites. He felt that instead of persecuting those whose religious beliefs and doctrines weren't acceptable, people ought to have encouraged dialogue. A few of his tenants and their families who were Catholics had been targeted. It was for reason of providing a refuge for them that he'd had the dungeons built while claiming that they were for debt defaulters and other petty offenders.

Once George's throne was secure, however, and he got the title, Arthur had to choose a side and thus he settled for his deep loyalty to the crown. So, he ensured safe passage for the few refugees up to Scotland and then shut up the dungeons. For over seventy years, they'd remained unused, if the annals were to be believed. But it was now clear that someone knew about the existence of the dungeons and at some point in the recent past, they had been used.

Or else how would the strangers in the night have known that they were there?

A troubling thought came to her mind. Could Lord Percival possibly be involved? After all, the manor belonged to his family and if there was anyone who knew its every nook and cranny, it was the current duke. But why all the secrecy, unless he was involved in something illegal, which frightened her. She'd worried about saving his name and family, but what if he was the one who was behind all the trouble? She knew that many grand old houses had underground passages that had been used to smuggle contraband items and sometimes people when the need arose. Could someone in the House of Warren have been involved in smuggling? It was quite possible but she didn't want it to be true.

Carefully studying the architectural design of the manor and the dungeons, she noted some strange markings made along what she purported to be the walls of the latter. Not understanding what these meant, she returned everything back to its place and went back to bed, spending a while in deep thought.

* * *

"Your grace, as part of the children's lessons, they need to learn about the history of the House of Warren. I took the liberty of finding books about your family and then came across something else," she told him the next morning, having gone to him in the study. Eddie and Aurie were having one of their weekly baking lessons with Marion and she had a few moments to herself.

"What is it, Miss Campbell?" He looked up from the estate books he'd been studying before her arrival.

"The structure of the manor. It's a very large house and I found out that there are dungeons under the west wing. How does a person get through to them?"

Percy frowned slightly, "Why would you want to go down to the dungeons? My brother and I played down there when we were young and that was years ago. Once we went to Eton, we forgot all about them and I don't think anyone else has been down there in

years. There could be some dangerous animals and rodents down there so please don't let the children go there. Bernard and I discovered that a tunnel led out of the dungeons and this could be the passageway for dangerous animals even though the gate leading to it is supposed to have remained locked for decades. Serpents, scorpions and the like are able to slip through, thus making those dungeons very dangerous."

Penny wondered if perhaps the duke was giving her a subtle warning about venturing into the dungeons because his friends were down there. But she quickly dismissed the thought when he spoke his next words and her heart settled down.

"If you ever want to go down there, ask me and I'll be your guide. Don't ever try to go alone because you could get lost down there and by the time someone finds you, you'll be so frightened and traumatized. As I said there is a tunnel and perchance if the gate is unlocked, you could end up in it and find yourself in danger."

"Thank you, your grace," she curtsied and went out of the study. Remembering the strange markings on the design she'd seen, she deduced that those probably indicated the tunnels that led away from the manor through the dungeons. Someone had really taken the time to ensure that there was a safe passageway should it ever be needed.

That night sleep was elusive and instead of spending hours tossing and turning, Penny decided to explore further. It was quite a risky venture but something seemed to be pushing her to discover what was going on. Using her memory of the architectural designs of the manor, she knew that the door to the dungeons led off the closet at the end of the hallway. At some point in time, the closet had been used for storing cleaning materials but it now stood empty. The west wing had been Percy's grandmother's quarters and was currently occupied by Marie Benoit. Did the woman know about the existence of the secret door carefully concealed at the back of the cleaning closet? Only a person who knew the layout of the manor could possibly know about it.

"Thank you," she whispered to whoever had kept such meticulous records of the manor.

The hallway was dark and her footsteps sounded quite loud on the wooden tiles. Penny kept expecting someone to emerge from out of the shadows and ask her what she was up to. She didn't have an answer should that happen, but she would think of something if the need arose. Finally, she made it to the closet without any mishaps, found the door and was glad when it opened. The fact that it didn't squeak because of years of misuse meant that the hinges had recently been oiled. Someone in the manor was using this door and she had to be careful not to walk into a trap.

Pausing for the longest time, she listened for any sounds coming from beyond. When she heard none, opened it further and slipped through. At first, she couldn't hear anything but was glad that someone had thoughtfully provided lighting. From her position on the wide steps, she peeped over the railings and saw torches strategically placed to provide maximum lighting. Standing in the shadows enabled her to remain concealed so she listened again.

In the silence of the dungeons she heard murmurs in the distance and tiptoed carefully so she could get close enough to hear what was being said. It was possible that some servants had discovered the tunnels and were using them for smuggling purposes. She really needed to know what was going on if she was to ensure the safety of the man she loved and the twins.

* * *

Percy was angry at himself for being such a pushover. He ought to have refused to allow Marie to stay at the manor but once again, he'd let a pretty face dictate his actions. Marie was trouble and he should know.

Back in Paris about seven years previously, he'd fallen in love with her or as he now acknowledged, the illusion of the beautiful woman he'd perceived her to be. For a while, he'd thought about proposing to her and even brought her to England to meet his family. But then she started becoming really radicalized in her conversations. She also started keeping company with some unsavoury characters and disappearing for days on end without any explanations. When she kept trying to tell him to show his allegiance to Napoleon, he knew

it was time to depart. So, he'd ended their relationship and moved to a different town and thought that the matter was at an end.

He'd not heard from her again nor made any effort to contact her and soon got over his foolish feelings. But then a few days ago she'd showed up at his doorstep looking really desperate and he'd felt sorry for her. Her father had been killed by French troops loyal to the Bourbon Monarchy and she said it was all persecution. He'd believed her and sympathized with her plight. No matter one's political convictions, Percy believed that everyone ought to be given a fair trial and not be the victim of any form of persecution.

But now he knew why she was here. Napoleon had escaped from Elba and was trying to reorganize his loyal followers into an onslaught that would not only have him restored as the emperor of France, but to take over the whole of Europe and Britain as well. Surprisingly, the once deposed emperor still had quite a number of supporters and sympathizers left and was sending out spies all over England and Europe. In spite of his negative feelings towards the man, Percy admired his military prowess.

With her past loyalties to the emperor, Marie was clearly up to no good but he had no proof. He didn't want to accuse her of anything just in case she was in contact with other fanatics and they harmed him and his family. With the children and Penny in the house as well as the servants, their lives were all at risk and he needed to keep them all safe.

Something had to be done to get rid of Marie, but he didn't know how to go about it and that troubled him greatly.

Gruesome Secrets

“Percival est un traître et doit mourir,” Marie Benoit was saying and Penny froze in her tracks. She was the last person that Penny had expected to find in the dungeons. Having learnt a little French over the years, Penny could understand what was being said and her heart started beating rapidly. The woman continued speaking in French and the more she talked, the more Penny got scared. These people were clearly planning something sinister for the duke and she needed to warn him. But would he believe her? He seemed to be spending a lot of time with Marie and she was a guest in his house. Besides that, they’d been very close in Paris. But now Marie was declaring to her companions that Percy was a traitor and saying that he deserved to die.

From the ongoing conversation, she could tell that there were only three people in the dungeons for now. But she couldn’t be sure that the numbers wouldn’t keep adding, not unless they were stopped.

“I don’t want anyone to be suspicious,” Marie decided to speak English. It was clear that they didn’t expect anyone to know of their hideout and so felt free to converse in both languages. “You can’t go out of these dungeons unless it’s at night. Always use the door leading outside the house and not the one that is close to the rooms I’m occupying.” She laughed. “Percival had no idea why I specifically asked for those rooms. But take care that no one finds out about your presence here before our plans are ready. I’ll find a way of getting you more food and water and whatever else you need. Just make sure you keep a low profile at all times.”

“When will this all be over? I miss my home and my family,” one man said.

“All we have to do is be patient, Pierre. What Marie needs to work on is getting Percival to propose and marry her. Once she becomes the duchess, it will then be an easy task for all of us. It will be

natural for her to receive visitors from her home country and we can then come in and take control of the manor. This will then be one of the bases of our operations in the South of England. The emperor needs our help if he's to succeed. All hail to Napoleon, Conqueror of Europe and the British Empire, and ruler forever."

"May it be so," the other two chorused

Penny put a hand to her lips to restrain the loud gasp that had been about to slip out. She had to be very careful or she would be discovered and these people clearly meant business. They were fanatics and wouldn't hesitate to kill her if they thought she would expose them.

"Marie as the duchess will then do whatever is necessary to ensure that her husband meets with an unfortunate accident." The man continued. "We can then further our agenda and ensure that the emperor rules the whole world forever."

"All hail to Emperor Napoleon, Conqueror of Europe and the British Empire," the chant continued.

Deciding that she'd heard enough, Penny slipped back to her bedroom to spend the night pacing the floor. There was no way she was ever going to fall asleep knowing that evil was being planned right in the bowels of the manor. They were not safe.

In the morning, she was quite bleary eyed and hoped the twins wouldn't require her full attention.

* * *

"Miss Campbell, I wondered if you would help me with something," Penny was surprised when Marie walked into the nursery. The woman had been living in the manor for about two weeks but not once had she come to the nursery. "Do you have the time?"

"It depends on what you want me to help you with," Penny replied with saccharine sweetness. The woman was up to no good and she didn't trust her at all. "What may I do for you, Miss Marie?"

"I have some frocks in my trunks and since I won't be needing

them, I thought perhaps you could come and help me sort them out. A few might be adjusted to fit you and others can be sewn into pretty dresses for Aurelia.”

“That’s very generous of you, Miss Benoit but the children are in the middle of their lesson. Can we do this at some other time please?”

An unfathomable look crossed Marie’s face but she quickly erased it. “That’s no problem. Please tell me when you have some free time and I will then avail myself and we can go through my trunks.”

“Thank you, Miss Benoit,” and to conceal the fact that she was suspicious, Penny rose up and curtsied. “You’re very kind and generous to one of lowly estate such as me.”

“Well,” Marie hesitated at the door, changed her mind about saying anything else and left.

“What did Silly Marie want now?” Aurie asked.

“Child, I’ve told you not to call her that and you clearly heard her. She wants me to go to her bedchamber and get some clothes for myself and others to make you some pretty frocks.”

“I like her pretty clothes,” Eddie announced.

“I like them too,” Aurie said. “Will you take us when you go to Miss Marie’s bedchamber?”

An idea began to form in Penny’s mind. She was sure the other woman was setting a trap for her but she also wanted to find out more about Marie. She would go to her bedchamber, yes, but she would have many witnesses present.

“Are you nearly done with your lesson?”

“Yes, Miss Campbell. I want to go out and play.”

“You’ll be able to do that as soon as you finish the work I gave you. Now get back to your books so you can finish your work quickly.”

* * *

Marie was pacing the floor of her bedchamber and she was quite

agitated. She was sure the little governess knew something but she couldn't immediately tell how much. She'd smelled her rose scent in the dungeon which was no coincidence. Somehow, Miss Penelope Campbell had found the door leading to the dungeon and even been inside. But how much had she seen and did she know about the presence of the two men hiding down there?

There was only one thing to do, and that would be finding out how much. Marie had watched her father and other members of their movement extracting information out of people they suspected to be betraying their cause. Her eyes hardened. The little governess was going to reveal all she knew and then she would get rid of her once and for all.

A soft knock sounded at the door. "Come in."

The door opened and Penny put her head inside. "Is this a bad time, Miss Benoit?"

"Please call me Marie for we're going to be good friends, n'est pa? Do come in and let's get down to sorting through my trunks. I have a particularly beautiful gown that would look really divine on you."

"Thank you," Penny pushed the door wider and that's when Marie saw the entourage that stood there with her. "I asked Ella and Naomi to come and help me select the gowns. The children were very curious and asked if they could come too. Besides, after wrecking havoc to your bedchamber, it will be easy for us to clean and make it tidy once again, isn't that right?"

Marie's eyes hardened but she smiled. Penny felt a chill within her. This woman's eyes portended evil and she was glad that she'd had the foresight not to come alone. "Very well then," Marie said ungraciously. "Come in all of you but be careful not to trample down my precious belongings."

"We'll be very careful, Miss Benoit."

Accepting the Inevitable

He'd done it again! As Percy stared at the finished painting, he sighed deeply. Lately, his mind was off his work and he would find himself doing different paintings of Penelope Campbell. She was the children's governess, for crying out loud!

At least, the Regent's work had been completed and the restored paintings returned to London. He'd received a good commission for doing the work and a number of other nobles had shown interest in engaging his services. For now, he was just content to stay on his estate and oversee whatever was going on, especially since Marie was still around.

Europe was abuzz with Napoleon's attempts to once again reign as emperor and what made him particularly suspicious of Marie was the fact that she never once mentioned the incidents in France. Penny and even the children would often ask him for news about France and the self imposed emperor. The governess felt it was important for the children to be aware of the events happening in the world. To help in their discussions, Percy had changed the children's timetable slightly so they all had lunch together. No matter how heated the conversation between him and Penny got about Napoleon, with the children throwing in a silly remark here and there, Marie never once said a word. She was involved in something untoward but he had no idea what.

There was a knock at his studio door and he frowned. His servants knew never to disturb him when he was here and he wondered who it was. Even Penny and the children never came to seek him out as long as they knew he was in the studio.

When he saw the door knob turning, he quickly slipped behind a screen and watched to see who would enter. It was Marie and he saw her eyes light up first with greed and then anger. Back in Paris, he'd sold many paintings and she'd been the recipient of his

generosity. Since coming to Salisbury, she hadn't made any requests for money and he'd wondered why.

She stood before his latest painting of Penny and he saw the ugly look on her face. "How dare he!" she hissed, moving to look at the other similar paintings. From the way her hands were clenching and unclenching, Percy knew that she was barely restraining herself from ripping his canvases to shreds. Marie Benoit was a terribly possessive woman and he would have to watch her. By now she must have deduced that he had deep feelings for Penny, which wasn't how he'd wanted her to find out. He had hoped to tell her that they could never have a relationship again because his heart belonged to another. But the truth was now out and there was nothing he could do about it.

Then Marie seemed to remember what had brought her to the studio and walked to the far end of the studio and started browsing through the paintings he'd lined up along the wall. "Where is it?" He heard her ask and frowned. "Where is that painting?"

His eyes never left her and when she finally left the room, he came out of his hiding place and bolted the door. What had she been searching for, he wondered. All these were his own paintings, unless she'd known about the Regent's pieces, which was a good possibility. The servants had known about them and one must have told her about them albeit innocently.

Marie was an expert interrogator and an innocent person wouldn't even know they were under inquisition and would then reveal as much as she desired them to. She must have pretended to be friendly to one of the servants and somehow found out about what he was working on.

He nodded slowly and thoughtfully. Marie must have thought that he still had the Regent's paintings in his possession. "Thank You, Lord," he whispered, having dispatched them days before under the cloak of secrecy with Leonard and Atkins, and Simon had sent him confirmation of receipt. The precious paintings were all under proper lock and key at the Regent's court.

"I didn't find anything except Percival's own paintings," Marie hissed at Rene and Pierre. "That stupid servant girl deceived me. She said Percival had brought in some paintings from London. I managed to get into his studio and searched diligently but didn't find those paintings. We would have received a lot for them and our cause would be well financed." She didn't want to reveal that she'd also seen a number of paintings that Percy had done of the governess. From the way he'd painted her, it was clear he had strong feelings for her. This wasn't good and it could interfere with her plans. She wanted to scream in anger.

"Calm down, Marie, it's clear that those paintings are now long gone and there's nothing we can do about it. We need to begin preparing for whatever it is we have to do. Calm and rational minds can achieve more. Now, stop pacing and let's think."

"But we need the money."

"I know that but Rene is right," Pierre told her. "Focusing on our mission is what's important right now. We can't afford to be distracted by anything." He twisted his lips. "What about that governess, did you find out if she knows anything?"

"She's too stupid to know what's going on," Marie dismissed with a wave of her hand. "At first, I was afraid that she might know something when I smelled the rose scent. Then I realized that we all use the same soap in this house, made of rose petals. That's why the scent was in the dungeons. I use the same soap as the governess does."

"I hope that's all there is to it."

"Have no fear, if I suspect anything, we'll take immediate action to make sure our secrets remain safe. We'll overcome it all. Hail to Napoleon, Conqueror of Europe and Great Britain."

"All hail to the everlasting emperor."

Sense of Danger

“Are you sure that’s what you heard Marie saying?” Percy stared at Penny in horror. This sounded like a nightmare. They were in his study and the children were in the kitchen. She’d asked to see him urgently and he’d made time for her simply because he wanted to be close to her. Grateful for her presence, he waited for her to tell him about the children but her words had shocked him to the core. Marie wanted him dead because she termed him as a traitor. “Marie said I’m a traitor and deserve to die?” He repeated out loud.

Penny nodded. “Your grace, I don’t understand much French but that’s exactly what she said. It was so frightening and I thought she would catch me.”

“How many other people are down there?”

“There are two men, one called Pierre.” Penny saw Percy give a start. “You recognize him?”

“Pierre was one of the most notorious Napoleon loyalists. He was actually Marie’s father’s right hand man and closest friend. If Pierre is here in England and on my estate, then we’re in a lot of trouble unless we can get them out. He’s a vicious man, wouldn’t hesitate to slit a person’s throat if they’re a threat to him in any way.”

“How did Marie get involved with such people?”

“She was radicalized as a child. Her father took a very active part in the French Revolution to overthrow the Bourbon Dynasty of France and when Napoleon arose, Monsieur Benoit was one of his fiercest supporters. That’s the kind of household Marie grew up in. Men like Pierre were always coming and going in their house and just like her father, she’s fiercely loyal to them and their cause.”

“Why then....” Penny twisted her lips and shook her head. “I’m sorry, I have no right to be questioning you.”

"I know you were about to ask why I ever got involved with such a woman." He took a deep breath. "Marie is a very beautiful woman and quite charming. Now I realize that they use beautiful women as one of the ploys to recruit many people to support their cause. Indoctrination of young and impressionable men and women from across Europe is what made Napoleon very strong and I'm afraid that for a while, I fell prey to that. But then Marie's ideas were so radical and I couldn't stomach them anymore. That was the reason I decided to end the relationship and cut off all ties with her. To avoid a lot of problems with Marie and her family and at the advice of my mentor, Monsieur Atelier, I moved to a town in the north and next to the border with Belgium. For the next few years, I lived in Lille and that's where I was when I received news of the deaths of my father, brother and sister-in-law."

"Why did Marie then come here?"

Percy sighed. "Once, many years ago at the time when we'd just started our relationship and I was madly in love, I brought her here to meet my parents because at the time, I wanted to marry her. Mercifully, she rejected my proposal and I was really crushed. But just a month later, I was glad because I could walk away without any encumbrances once we ended our relationship. When she arrived and told me that her father had been killed and she was in trouble back home in Paris, I sympathized with her. War is one thing but persecutions are another, only I didn't immediately find out that Napoleon had escaped from Elba and was on the loose. Marie and the others must have known something even before it happened and immediately started getting into strategic positions. I just didn't realize that she had an ulterior motive for coming here. Now there are three of them and only God knows how many more running around England and hiding in dungeons and cellars."

"What are we going to do about this? If they find out that we know about their activities, we could be in danger. On the other hand, if they're found on your estate, you could be termed a traitor to England. Percy, I'm really scared for you and for the children."

"Come here," he held out his hands and she walked into them. "Don't worry, I'll find a way of getting rid of Marie and her men. Just keep the children close to you at all times and I'm going to ask for more guards and tell my men to be vigilant. Three people

shouldn't be very difficult to handle and overcome. My fear is if they have managed to get more people into the manor, then we could be facing a lot of trouble."

* * *

They didn't sense the presence of a third person in the study, being too busy trying to find a way out of their predicament. Marie's eyes hardened. She'd underestimated the little governess but the woman knew too much. With Percy now aware of what was going on right under his roof, their time was short and they had to do something. They would have to act fast and get in touch with the rest of their people.

Percival and Penelope Campbell would pay for trying to betray the cause of the Emperor. Napoleon would once again gain full power and this time not only over France, but the whole world. And she would be by his side as his Empress, for that's the promise she had made to her father as she'd held and watched him bleeding to death. Empress Marie Bonaparte nee Benoit, it had a good ring to it.

No duke or chit of a girl was going to stand in her way, and she slipped away and hastened to speak to Pierre and Rene about the latest developments.

Cause for Panic

“Percy, er, your grace,” Penny practically flew into the study. She was panting and the panic stricken look in her eyes made him shoot to his feet.

“Penny, breathe.” He came to her and held her by the shoulders. “What’s happened?”

“I can’t find the twins anywhere, they’re gone.”

“Gone?” He turned quite pale. “What do you mean they’re gone?”

“I’ve looked everywhere for them but can’t find them. Percy,” she forgot all propriety in her agitated state. “Percy, I don’t know where the children are,” then she burst into tears.

“Penny,” he pulled her into his arms as she sobbed. “We’ll find them, don’t worry. They couldn’t have gotten very far even if they were to go anywhere.”

“What if those evil men took them? Where’s Marie?”

“I don’t know, come to think of it, I haven’t seen her at all today. What time did the children go missing?”

“They had their breakfast and then I came down here to the study to get some books for our lessons today. When I returned, they weren’t there so I thought they might have followed Ella or Naomi to the kitchen. But none of the other servants have seen them. I think that wicked woman has them down in the dungeons.” She moved away from the comfort of his arms. Much as she’d like to stay there, they needed to find the children before it was too late.

“Let’s go and get them,” Percy was fuming. How dare Marie and her hoodlums lay a finger on the twins! If anything happened to the children, he would go to the ends of the earth to see that the culprits were punished.

"I tried both doors leading to the dungeons but they're locked from the other side. What if those wicked people have discovered the tunnels and taken the children out of the manor through there?"

"Finding those tunnels and navigating through them is very difficult for anyone who doesn't know them well. The children will slow them down." He shook his head. "I think Marie and her fanatical hoodlums are waiting for me to go down there so they can harm me."

"Then don't go."

"But I must. My children are in danger and need me," he said.

Even in the midst of all the panic, Penny managed a faint smile.

"Why are you smiling, do you have a solution?"

She shook her head. "You just called them your children," she said softly. "Before you only referred to them as your niece and nephew, or your brother's children."

He nodded. "That's because they're my children," he said with strong conviction. "I'm the only father they'll ever know and I need to protect them," she saw the helplessness in his eyes and moved closer to him, slipping her arms around him. He didn't resist but rested his chin on the top of her head.

"My little ones have been through so much in the past few months and just when they were settling down, this happens. They must be really frightened. I'll skin those people alive if any harm comes to them."

"Percy, let's think positively and pray that the twins will be fine."

"My greatest fear is that Pierre person. He's vicious and inhuman. I don't like the thought of the children being his captives."

"What are we going to do?"

"Let me get George to call all the servants and alert them to the danger we're in. Meanwhile, I need to find someone who understands the dungeons very well and can lead us through them. Bernard and I played down there but we were careful never to stray from the main dungeons and into the tunnels. If that's the route

they're using, they have about a two hour head start and could be halfway to Scotland by now."

"Who would know more about the dungeons and tunnels?"

"George is the longest serving member of this household and was here many years before I was born. Over the years, something must have been whispered among servants and older tenants."

* * *

As Percy explained to his servants what was going on, Marion's eyes blazed with anger. "To think that I welcomed that serpent into this household," she hissed. "I'll wring her neck with my bare hands."

If things weren't so grim, Penny would have laughed at the comical expression on the older woman's face.

"Marion," Percy said patiently, "Let's calm our tempers for now and think of a way of getting through those tunnels. George, do you know anyone who's been down there?"

George nodded. "Macdonald and his son Giyver often speak of smugglers using different tunnels in the past. He was quite notorious himself before coming to live on this estate. Even though he doesn't engage in illegal activities anymore, I'm sure he can tell us something of importance that can help us find the little ones. The secret to having tunnels is to make sure there are very many exit points just in case one should need them. The smugglers know different routes and Macdonald should help."

"Very good then. Please alert all the tenants to be on the lookout for any strangers and report them immediately. These men are very dangerous and probably armed, so let people not try to arrest them unless they're sure they can overpower them. We haven't lost a soul yet and I don't want us to. If possible, I hope that we can catch them without shedding a single drop of blood."

He turned to Penny. "Secure all the doors while George and I are gone. Leonard and Atkins are here to help you, and make sure that someone is watching the doors leading to the dungeons just in case they decide to come back this way. We're short staffed but let's be

alert and we shall soon overcome and bring back our little ones.”

The servants hastened to do as bid and Percy once again asked Penny to follow him to his study. “Please be very careful. We can’t be too sure that Marie doesn’t have sympathisers among the staff, even though I trust them. Still, human nature is frail and people can easily be enticed into doing the unexpected. Do you know how to handle a pistol?”

“No, your grace.”

“I’ll give you one. All you have to do is aim and shoot. The human body surface is large and it will land somewhere. But be careful only to take it out if you intend to use it. Don’t threaten a person with it if you have no willingness to use it for they might turn the tables on you, grab it from you and shoot you.”

Penny nodded. She detested guns but for the sake of the children, she was willing to handle one.

“These,” Percy took two small pistols from their box that he’d pulled out of the safe behind his desk, “Belonged to my grandmother. She was the one who taught me how to shoot and she kept them with her all the time. When she died, mother took them and gave them to me when I returned from France. I keep them loaded and so you have to be very careful when handling them. Come here.” He held out a hand to her and she went to him. “Feel them,” he placed them in her palms, his own hands covering hers. “These are small and harmless unless discharged. You control them, they don’t control you and you don’t have to be afraid of them. But my father used to say, never take another life or harm someone unless you absolutely have to. Life is precious but so is defending oneself and loved ones. Can I trust you with these, my darling?”

“Yes, Percy,” she said breathlessly, blushing when he placed a swift kiss on her lips.

“Take good care of yourself and this house for you now belong. Let me go and find the village constable as well as members of the local militia. We can’t have fanatical Frenchmen and women running loose in this duchy. I have a duty to protect my people and will do so with my last breath.”

“Percy,” Penny put the pistols on the table and put her arms around him. “Please be safe and come back to me, to us.”

“You can count on that, dear girl.”

Following the Clues

The dungeons were steeped in darkness according to one of the young men they'd sent as a scout. If there had been any light, it had long been extinguished as the culprits fled. The thought of going down there was frightening but Penny didn't want to think about her fears right now. They needed to find the children. According to what George had said and which was confirmed by Macdonald, the dungeons led to tunnels which went on for miles around the countryside. In the days of danger, many tunnels were dug to confuse any pursuers and they all intersected at different points.

"We must get to the first junction before they enter any one of the other seven tunnels that lead from there. They might decide to split up so as to confuse us and that would make it very difficult for us to find them given our few numbers," Old Macdonald who was also part of their team said. "Don't anybody wander off on their own. We've got the twins to look for and rescue and the last thing we want is to spend precious moments searching for anyone else."

"Lord Percival has gone to speak to and enlist the help of the militia from the closest camp. Given that the war is raging on in Europe, we may not get many to help because they've probably enlisted, but at least a few will do. Thank you all so much for coming to the rescue of Eddie and Aurie. Lord Percival will himself return to express his gratitude," Penny said.

Looking round the dining room at the ragtag band of tenants who'd showed up in their tens to help, she felt so proud of them. Only one or two had rifles. The rest had brought their pruning prongs, axes and scythes. They were ready to go to war to defend their duke and his family and she prayed that they would all return unharmed."

George held his hand up. "Yes George?"

"Miss Campbell, we would prefer it if you and the other women stayed up here. We don't want to worry about you too." The other

men nodded and Penny knew they were right. Though she wanted to be there when the children were found and rescued, she was relieved that she didn't have to walk in the dark dungeons.

"We'll prepare food and be ready for your return," she promised.

"And pray too. Let the good Lord guide our every steps and cause discomfiture to our enemies," Macdonald said.

There was a chorus of 'amen.'

"Let the Lord who created the world above and below show us where to go because He knows the secrets kept in the bowels of the earth."

"Amen."

"Let the Lord go forth and protect the dear future Duke of Salisbury."

"Amen."

* * *

"Eddie, are you afraid?" Aurie's voice trembled in the darkness.

"No, we'll be alright."

"Are you sure? Will Uncle Percy come and get us?"

"I know he will try but even if he fails to do so, I will get us out of here," the little boy said fiercely. He crawled in the darkness to where his sister was and they held each other. "Miss Campbell told us that whenever we're afraid we should ask God to help us."

Aurie nodded but then realized that her brother couldn't possibly see her. "Yes. I'm not so afraid anymore. Do you know where we are?"

"I think so, but I can't be sure. Remember when we used to come and play down here before Uncle Percy told us not to?"

"Yes."

"I used to count the number of steps from the door to each cell. We're in the last cell, the one near the tunnel."

"What do you think Silly Marie will do to us?"

"I don't know but she's a bad woman. When Uncle Percy finds us, we'll tell him that she's wicked and took us. I don't want him to marry Silly Marie."

"We'll make sure he doesn't. I want Miss Campbell to be our aunt."

"Me too." Eddie listened keenly. "Shh! Quiet now, they're coming back. I'm going back to my corner so they think that we're afraid. Don't scream or anything, okay?"

"Yes, Eddie. Hurry, I see light coming."

When Marie, Pierre and Rene walked into the cell, they found the children sobbing in their respective corners. "Stand up both of you," she shouted and they got to their feet. "If we didn't have to get away very fast, we would bind you up and carry you. But you'll have to use your own feet to run so come here."

They walked over to her, heads bent and shaking with fright. Marie smiled maliciously. "Your uncle thinks he can defeat me and what I came to do here in England," she threw her head back and laughed. "Well, he's probably running around aimlessly trying to find someone to help him. You belong to me now and I'll take you to France and sell you off to a coal miner. You'll work in the underground caves for the rest of your lives and nobody will ever find you. Then, we will kill your uncle and Miss Campbell and you'll never see either of them ever again."

Her words produced a wail from Eddie and Aurie joined him.

"Shut up right now or I'll box your ears."

The children's muffled sobs told her that she had them cowered. Propaganda was the best form of subduing one's enemies and she was going to use it to keep the children submissive.

"I don't think we'll get very far with these children," Pierre said. "They're just hampering our swift escape. We should get rid of them."

"I think so too," Rene agreed.

"Shut up both of you. We need these rascals in case we get cornered. Percival will do anything to get them back and we'll use them to buy our way out of any situation. You can carry them for you are strong men, aren't you?"

Pierre merely grunted while Rene glared at the children. They'd been walking for miles and didn't seem to be making much progress. The three adults had no idea of where they were because they'd never ventured beyond the dungeons. Eddie, however, knew his way around the tunnels. What nobody knew was that when his father was still alive, he'd brought him down here many times.

"A man needs to be able to protect his loved ones but if he fails, he ought to have a good route of escape for them, my son. These dungeons were built by my great grandfather who was the first duke of the House of Warren. You'll be the duke one day, Eddie and will be called upon to keep your mother, sister and everyone else safe. Learn about each tunnel very well for there are seven of them leading from the manor to different parts of this county and beyond."

"Papa, they're so many."

"I know, child. When I was your age, my father, your grandfather, brought me down here. For decades, we as the dukes have mastered these dungeons. It won't be easy but you've got to do it. Don't be afraid of anything, just seek the protection and safety of your family."

Eddie was a highly intelligent child but most adults saw him as a mere boy. Even in the darkness, he took note of wherever they were stepping. Not a single day had passed by that he didn't come down to the dungeons to learn something more. In the deep of the night when everyone was asleep, he would sneak out of bed and make his way down here and for about an hour, would just poke around. His sister was scared and he was angry at Silly Marie for doing this to her. They were going to pay, and he would get Aurie back to safety.

"We need to keep moving," Marie shouted and the two men

scrambled to their feet. Eddie did the same and helped Aurie up.

"We're going to run away from them," he whispered in her ear as the three adults conferred. "Follow whatever I do."

"Yes Eddie."

"What are you whispering about?" Marie walked threateningly towards the twins.

"Miss Benoit, we're very hungry."

"You think I'm your mother or governess? You'll eat when I want you to, now let's get going."

"Yes, Miss Benoit."

Pierre led the small group, followed by Eddie then Aurie, Marie and Rene brought up the rear. When they stepped into the third tunnel, Eddie nearly gave a shout of joy. He'd been praying that they would select this particular tunnel. Just a few yards ahead was a small diversion that was very easy to miss. While building the tunnels, there had been a cave in and the diggers had to dig around the rocks and earth. What Eddie and his father discovered on one of their visits was that there was some space through which a child could slip and then emerge on the other side and into a different tunnel. Eddie had been in and out so many times that he could get in even when blindfolded. Speed was going to be required and just as they got close to the opening, he pretended to fall down.

"Get up at once," Marie screamed.

"My leg," Eddie sobbed, yelling loudly and moving to cover the open hole since Pierre was holding the torch over him. "My leg."

Marie made an impatient sound and walked a few feet away. The adults turned their backs and that's what Eddie had been hoping for. "Quick Aurie, slip into the hole behind me." Used to playing pranks with her brother, the little girl was swift on her feet and slipped through. Eddie followed her and just in time for Marie turned as they disappeared into the hole.

"Where are the children?" She screamed. "Rene, you should have been watching them."

"You were the one who called us for a stupid meeting. Pierre said we should get rid of them but you insisted on them tagging along. What if they lead people to us?"

"Don't be stupid, they're just little children, what do they know? They will get lost in these dungeons and that will serve them right."

Meanwhile, Eddie told Aurie to hide. "Where are you going?" She asked in a trembling voice.

"Don't worry, I'll be back. Make sure you don't wander off."

"I won't," she promised.

Eddie would have let the thugs go but the thought of Marie and the men returning to harm his uncle and Miss Campbell made him decide to teach them a lesson. He slipped out of their hiding place and into the second tunnel. Just ahead, it intersected with the one they'd been walking in and he hurried forward. He needed to slow the three down because he was sure someone was coming to rescue them. Even if two got away, he would have at least one left. When he got to the place where the two tunnels intersected, he pulled out the string he always carried, tied it to both ends and sat down in the shadows to wait.

Angry voices alerted him to the fact that the three were drawing closer and he closed his eyes to pray. There was a thud and the torch fell as Pierre went sprawling downwards. Since the three weren't expecting any kind of ambush, Marie and Rene fell on top of Pierre and there was a sickening snap.

"My leg," Pierre hollered. "My leg is broken."

While the three adults struggled to disentangle themselves, Eddie slipped out of his hiding place, grabbed the torch and ran. As he ran, he dragged it on the ground and it soon went out. Now they couldn't follow him and even if they did, would never catch him.

Still carrying the stick that had held the extinguished torch, he returned to find his sister. "Aurie, let's go home."

"Where are those people?"

"Don't worry about them. We need to find someone who will go and arrest them. Quick, let's go."

Found At Last

"I see something," Macdonald called out and bent down. There was a small pink ribbon along the path. "I see another ahead," he said and soon he had four in his hand. Then he grinned at his companions in the light of the torches they carried. "The little girl was leaving clues for us to find. Such clever children."

"Wait, I hear something," the ten men stopped and listened. They could hear someone coming and braced themselves to deal with any danger.

"Mr. Macdonald?" A small voice called out in the darkness and the old man gave a yelp.

"It's Little Lord Edgar, where are you?"

"Come to the second tunnel. I'm really tired and she might wake up soon."

The men looked at each other, retraced their steps and then joined the tunnel the child indicated. They hadn't gone very far when their eyes met a very astonishing spectacle. Their torches lighted on the prostrate form of a woman but it was the children who made them laugh. Eddie and Aurie were seated on the woman's back.

"Lord Edgar, what happened here?"

"We managed to escape from Silly Marie and the other men. One of them fell and broke his leg and the other one also hit his head and swooned, but she followed us. So we tripped her and when she fell, we decided to sit on her and wait. This tunnel is the central one and we could hear you people coming."

"Where are the other two men?" George asked.

"The big one broke his leg and the other smaller man is lying on the ground somewhere. Can you go and find them and bring them

back?”

“You bet,” Macdonald said. He and a few men went in the direction indicated by Eddie, while two others hauled the still unconscious woman and dragged her back through the tunnel, into the dungeons and back to the manor.

* * *

Penny was talking to Atkins who was standing at the door that was inside the closet when they heard a commotion on the other side.

“They’re coming back,” she shouted and was amused when Marion charged down the hallway, a heavy skillet in her hands.

“Let me at them,” she said but Atkins restrained her.

“Let’s wait and see who emerges. It might be our own people coming back.”

When they heard the bolt being pushed back, Penny’s hand went to one of the small pistols in her pocket. “It’s George, open up.”

“Who else is with you?”

“Miss Campbell, it’s Eddie and Aurie.”

“Quick Atkins, open the door and let them through.”

Immediately the closet door opened, the twins charged out and straight into Penny’s arms. “My darlings, you’re safe and well.” She was laughing and crying at the same time. “What?” Her eyes opened wide when she saw Marie being dragged in by two burly men.

“Bring smelling salts,” one of the men said and Marion rushed to do as bid. Marie revived and when she found herself surrounded, pretended to slump once again.

The others soon returned, dragging the two men with them. When Marie realized that it was the end, she opened her eyes and screeched.

“You terrible children,” Marie’s shrill voice caused Penny to wince.

The woman was being closely guarded by two angry villagers for daring to lay a hand on their future duke. Her two men were lying on the floor where the villagers had tossed them, both completely subdued. The one called Pierre had a broken ankle and seemed to be in a lot of pain, but Penny's attention was on the twins.

"Are you alright?" She looked anxiously from one to the other. "Did these people harm you?"

Eddie and Aurie grinned at her. Their faces were covered in grime but she didn't care, and kissed their cheeks. "I was so worried about you."

"Where's Uncle Percy?" Aurie asked. "I always said Silly Marie was foolish."

"Aurie!"

"Miss Campbell, are you crying?"

"No, my darling," she said tears coursing unchecked down her face. She was so relieved that no harm had come to the children. These had been the longest six hours of her life and she never wanted to go through anything like that again.

"I love you both so much," she kissed their foreheads. "Were you scared? Uncle Percy has gone to bring some friends so Marie and the other bad people can be taken away. They will never hurt anyone again."

"We weren't scared," the brave and fierce look on Eddie's face made Penny feel really proud of him. "Silly Marie thought we would cry and she kept telling us that she was taking us to France where she would sell us to a man who would take us to the coal mines to work there."

Penny glared at Marie and took a threatening step forward, but Marion was there to restrain her. "It's not worth it," the older woman whispered into her ears.

"How dare you threaten these innocent children? You're a wicked woman and will pay for all your evil deeds."

"Innocent?" Marie cried out. "They're little demons. See Pierre's leg is broken and Rene has a bad wound on his head from when he fell

and hit it on a jagged rock. And I'm," she burst into a tirade of French words just as Percy returned with five fierce looking soldiers.

"Sorry that I stayed away for so long. My Militia friends were on a training exercise and I had to ride out to find them." He looked at Marie, whose head was bowed. "You'll pay for all your crimes against my family and England. I welcomed you into my home as a friend because I thought you needed my help, yet all this time you wanted to bring harm to me." He shook his head. "Take them away and see to it that they're properly dealt with as befits spies."

"Percy no," Marie screamed in terror. "Please be merciful to me."

"As you were going to show mercy to me and my family?"

"I didn't want to take the children but Pierre and Rene made me do it. You know how much I love you and would never have done this to you. I was just trying to buy us time to escape and I would have returned the children unharmed."

"I really don't want to listen to your lies anymore, Marie." And he walked away as the militia men led the three prisoners away, led by the beaming village constable.

* * *

Penny found Percy seated in his study, staring blankly at the wall. She stood undecided in the doorway until he sensed her presence and raised his hand to bid her enter.

"I'm sorry about all this," she said.

"It wasn't your fault. I should never have invited Marie into my home because she's evil and for that I'm sorry."

"I came to find out if you were alright."

He looked at her with an intensity that made her blush. "Do you care, Miss Campbell?"

"Yes, your grace," she felt really nervous especially when he stood up and came around the large desk.

“Do you care as an ordinary citizen would for the duke of her county? Or is it merely as someone being concerned for the parent of her students? What is it, Miss Campbell?”

“All of those,” her voice sounded husky.

“Is that all,” he stood right in front of her and raised her chin. “Could there perhaps be something else that you’re not telling me?”

“Your grace...”

“My name is Percy. You’ve used it in the past,” he didn’t let go of her chin. “You’re a very shy young woman.”

He dropped his hand and moved away, turning his back to her. “I don’t need your pity, Penelope Campbell. If that’s all you feel for me then I’m better off not knowing.”

“It’s not pity,” she struggled with her words.

He turned around and stood looking at her. “What is it? Why can’t you just say what you feel?”

“Because I’m scared,” this came out as a whisper and once again, Percy found himself standing right in front of her.

“What are you scared of?”

“Being inappropriate. You’re the duke and I’m just the governess.”

He chuckled softly and put his hands on her shoulders. “Dear girl, I know that you’re shy in so many ways but I need to know what’s going on in your head.”

“Percy.”

“You say my name so delightfully,” he knew that he shouldn’t tease her so mercilessly but he was in love and he needed to know that she felt the same way about him too. “Now, as your duke, I charge you to pour your heart out to me.”

“I love you,” she blurted out then tried to get away.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he held her more firmly. “You don’t just cast that out into the open and then think you can flee. What is it you love about me?”

“You’re kind, gentle and care about people so much.”

He made an impatient sound. “You make me sound so dull and boring.”

“I haven’t finished yet,” she protested indignantly and he hid a smile. “You’re also very intelligent, charming and extremely handsome.”

“And?”

She looked at him in confusion. “And what?”

“And you’d love to be my wife and my duchess,” he finished off with a wink and she turned red. “You’re such a delightful woman, Penny. Now say it after me.”

“Say what?”

“Woman, will you stop arguing with me?”

“I’m sorry,” she giggled and he kissed her forehead.

“Say you’ll be my wife and my duchess.”

“But you haven’t even asked me yet,” she retorted.

“My great mistake,” he grinned at her and she was happy to see that the shadows had been banished from his eyes. “Beloved Penelope Campbell, will you do the great honour of becoming my wife, mother to my children and my duchess?”

“Absolutely delighted to,” and when he pulled her into his arms, a loud cheer came from beyond the doorway.

“What?” Still holding her hand, he strode to the door and threw it open. He was just in time to catch all his servants crowded at the doorway and in the midst of them were the twins. He grinned at them. “Well, I believe you’ve heard the good news that Miss Penelope Campbell has agreed to become my wife.”

“Congratulations, your grace,” George spoke on behalf of all the servants. The males bowed while the females curtsied.

“Thank you, we’ll be consulting all of you as we make our plans.”

Behold the Duchess

Watching the twins as they slept after the excitement of fully participating in the wedding of the year as the society termed it, Penny smiled gently. She loved these little rascals who'd brought her into the life of the man she loved so deeply and wholly.

They were so little and looked so peaceful as they lay there without a care in the world. "They look so harmless," Percy came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. "And yet they're little terrors."

"Innocent and shrewd at the same time, no one stands a chance against them."

"Which is why you and I, my beautiful duchess, will have to form a very strong united front against them. Otherwise, they will soon conquer us," he was laughing as he said this. "Who would have known that these two would lead you to me to this glorious day? And it all started with them stealing your precious flowers."

"And hurling your agate quill holder through my kitchen window," she added. "Yes this has been a really wonderful journey culminating in our wedding day."

"You were the most beautiful bride in the world today," he kissed her gently on the lips.

"It was a glorious day," she agreed. "You made it so beautiful for me, for all of us."

"You deserve it and much more, my darling."

The two of them were at peace at last. The duke and duchess who'd saved their people from danger. According to George, who'd heard it from the village constable, the militia had rounded up more of Marie's men even though a few had managed to escape.

"We were really lucky," Penny whispered, not wanting to think about what might have happened had she not woken up suddenly that night that she'd seen Pierre and Rene slipping into the house. "We might have gone on with our lives not knowing that evil was brewing beneath us."

"My darling," Percy's arms tightened around her. "Let's celebrate this victory and not think about what might have been. You proved yourself to be a true and worthy duchess by saving the lives of your subjects. Right now, you're the darling of Warrenshire and indeed the whole of Salisbury and your name will go down in the annals of the House of Warren as a very brave and courageous woman."

"It was Eddie who brought the prisoners home," she said with a smile. "I always knew that child was special."

"He's always been intelligently way ahead of children his age," Percy smiled. "He will make a good duke one day, bold and courageous."

Penny nodded.

"Darling Penny, please tell me something."

She raised her eyes and saw uncertainty lurking there. "What is it, my love?"

"I'm the third son of my father."

"Third?"

Percy nodded. "We had a brother who died at birth, he was the eldest. Then Bernard was born and finally me. I have no claim to this title because my brother has a son, who is Eddie. When he comes of age, I'll relinquish the title to him because he's the rightful duke."

"Which is just as it should be," Penny nodded. "We'll hold the title and estate in trust for our little boy who has proved that he will one day be a wonderful duke. When the time comes, we'll hand everything over to him. My prayer is that we will be found to be faithful stewards."

"You're an exceptional woman, my darling."

“I actually feel uncomfortable being referred to as Lady Penny.”

“For now, let it be. But I also hold a title in my own right.”

“Really?”

Percy nodded. “My mother’s father was an earl and when he died, the title naturally passed on to me as his sole surviving male relative. But this one superseded the other and I have to hold it in trust for my nephew. In future, you’ll still be titled though you’re a countess.”

“I’m just glad we’re here for Lord Edgar, the Duke of Salisbury.”

And the little lord who had been pretending to sleep, smiled in satisfaction as he finally succumbed. His title was secure and the lineage of the House of Warren would continue, as would his father’s legacy through him.

* * *

Observations on Love

**A Clean Regency Romance Story of Two Very
Different Twin Sisters**

Papa's Unrealistic Expectations

Franklin Reed beamed approvingly as his twin daughters entered the dining room and sat down at the table. "Excellent, girls," he said. "Precisely on time."

Mr. Reed did not sanction schedules which brought a person either too early or late to an appointment. Meals in the Reed household were served precisely on time; the servants knew better than to vary by so much as a minute. Mrs. Reed, who had been anxious that her daughters would be late for the morning meal, smiled in relief as the girls sat down.

"You look charming, my dears," Mr. Reed said. "Once again, your mother has chosen excellently. That shade of blue is most suitable for your complexions."

"Thank you, Papa," Catherine told him.

Lydia said nothing. To have reached the age of twenty and to be dressed in clothing identical to that of her twin sister was nothing short of humiliating. Catherine was more adept at appeasing their father than was Lydia, who had the sharper tongue and the quicker temper. Her ire was never roused against her sister, however; the girls were friends as well as sisters.

"Lydia?" prompted Mrs. Reed.

Lydia raised her head to return a bland and guileless expression to her mother.

"Mama?" she inquired innocently.

"Your father has complimented you."

"As we are twins, and Catherine thanked him, I thought it would be excessive for me to do likewise, for you know that she and I think alike in all things."

Underneath the table, the toe of Catherine's shoe found her sister's foot and pressed a light warning. As a twin, Catherine recognized the sarcasm underlying her sister's seemingly blameless words.

Mr. Reed frowned. "While I comprehend the logic of your thinking," he said, "I believe it is wise to assume that in matters of courtesy, a woman should always express her appreciation when she is given praise. You must trust my judgment in these matters, and be led by me."

"Of course, Papa," Lydia said. "Papa, do you think that I should begin eating the eggs first, or the bacon? I have no doubt that there is a scientific theory which instructs in the proper sequence of eating, but alas, I am but a woman and I find myself horribly uncertain."

Mr. Reed's brow furrowed, but his daughter's blonde hair, blue eyes, and seraphic expression lulled his suspicions. It was not the first time that Lydia had used her fair looks to her devious advantage.

"Of course, my dear. And I applaud you for striving to think of the digestive process, rather than your appetite. I confess that I don't know if there is a preference. Perhaps I shall bring it up when the gentlemen meet tonight in my study. Amesbury Halifax, an eminent scientist, will be among us; I shall ask him. I expect he shall have some thoughts on the matter. However, he is currently advancing the advantages of a meatless regimen, so perhaps he shall advise against bacon at all," Mr. Reed chuckled.

Mrs. Reed obediently tittered in response and Catherine smiled; it was understood in the Reed household that when the head of the household found something meriting a laugh, the females should emulate him.

"Oh, well," Lydia said, using her fork and knife with vigor, "in the absence of guidance, I shall please myself."

Mrs. Reed looked worried. "My dear girl," she said, "gentlemen do not fancy young ladies who display such zeal for their food. A gentle and delicate manner is much to be favored when eating."

"No one is here to see me, Mama, except for you and Papa and

Catherine, and I do not think any of you will be offended if I do justice to Mrs. Landon's excellent bacon."

"Perhaps not, Lydia, but you seem to be captivated by a spirit of levity this morning which is not becoming," her father told her. "A young lady must endeavor to be serious and not frivolous, or she will not attract a suitable husband. I expect you girls to be married no later than one-and-twenty, you know. A young bride is better able to be molded by her husband. I shall soon be entertaining suitors for you both and I do not wish to be disappointed."

Catherine's face revealed anticipation. "Truly, Papa? Are you seeking husbands for us?"

"Of course, my little mouse," Mr. Reed said, reaching over to chuck her under the chin. "I should not wish for either of you to be spinsters. A woman must marry; it is her duty. She is by nature constructed and designed to be a help-meet to her husband, so that he may conduct his business while his wife creates a cozy nest for him, as your mother has done for me." He bestowed upon Mrs. Reed a benign smile, which had the effect of turning his wife's round face pink with the pleasure of his praise.

"Whom will you choose, Papa?"

"My little mouse is eager, I see, to marry," her father chuckled. "Do you not have some regrets at the prospect of leaving your doting papa?"

"Of course," Catherine assured him. "But I know that you will choose wisely and I am sure that you will select a gentleman of honor who will please you."

"Certainly, certainly. I wish to have my daughters settled nearby as well, and that requires a husband who is not a gadabout. London is very well for gentlemen, but it is a city which lures women into webs of deceit, vanity, and gossip. I would have my girls in the village, or at least in the county."

As her father chatted on about the iniquity of London, Lydia thought of the city. It was her dream to go there. London had everything. Learned men discussed the events of the day, pursued their scientific advances, and experimented with bold new ideas

that were transforming the world. She knew of such things because, after her father had finished with the newspaper and before he put it into the fireplace, she stole into his study when he was away and furtively read. It was a frustrating activity because she could not get so engrossed in the newspaper that she failed to be alert for the sounds of anyone, even the maid, coming into the room. Mr. Reed's views on women reading newspapers was known to everyone in the household. Catherine knew, of course, that Lydia had a secret life, but Catherine would never divulge the secret.

Why, Lydia wondered, couldn't she be more like her amiable, gentle-hearted sister, who was so entirely pleased with the feminine pursuits of playing the piano, painting watercolors, and sketching? Catherine was a favorite when the Reed ladies made calls; she could converse with cranky battleaxes and gauche schoolgirls alike and take part in a conversation that flowed. Lydia's tongue was paralyzed when she was expected to broach an opinion upon village topics or fashion or music. She would have preferred to discuss other subjects. She would have preferred to discuss the subjects that Papa and his gentlemen scholars talked about when they met in his study, but females were not welcome at those gatherings.

"And that is why," said Mr. Reed, who had been expounding at length upon his views of matrimony and the submissive role which wives occupied so that their husbands might thrive, "I shall put the utmost effort into finding husbands for you both who are entirely suitable for your womanly natures."

"I hope, husband," said Mrs. Reed, "that you will take care to find husbands for our daughters who will be as like you in every way possible."

Under most circumstances, Mr. Reed would not have permitted his wife to proffer advice. But in this circumstance, he smiled modestly. "You do me great honor, wife," he said. "I hope that I shall select husbands for our daughters who satisfy your request."

Mrs. Reed smiled. "They shall be, in that case, as blessed as I have been to have you as my husband."

Lydia pushed her plate away. "I'm not so hungry anymore," she said. "I believe I would benefit from a walk."

"If you're in need of exercise, why don't you go into the village?" Mrs. Reed suggested. "I need some items from the shops."

"I had planned to walk across the hillside," Lydia objected.

"Far too exerting for a woman," said her father. "A pleasant stroll to the village is much better and purposeful. I know how you young ladies enjoy the shops and like to amuse yourself, like children, at seeing what bright new things are in the windows to tempt you."

Catherine's toe, well-timed and a bit more forceful than the previous pressing, managed to silence her sister.

A Visit to the Book Shop

"I loathe walking to the village in the finer weather," Lydia complained as they set off. "It's not as bad in winter, when everyone is so bundled up with hoods and mufflers and heavy coats that no one notices that we're dressed as if we were eight years old, exactly alike. But look at us!"

"I believe that Papa and Mama think it makes us unique."

"We are the only identical twins in the entire county. We could not be more unique!" fumed Lydia, kicking a stone that had the misfortune to be in her path. "We are unique because we are exactly alike, the mirror of each other. What a conundrum!"

Catherine laughed. "Lydia, you do fret so," her sister said. "Are you not happy that Papa has finally decided to find husbands for us? I declare that I am glad. I want to marry and have a family. Do you not want the same?"

It was a pleasant summer day. The foliage of the village was in ripe bloom, with trees bursting forth in different shades of green. The scent of flowers perfumed the air, and the gardens that they passed as they went on their way were tributes to the dedication of the groundskeepers. Catherine, who was very fond of flowers, commented on their beauty as she and Lydia passed by. Lydia, having no ability to nurture a garden, barely gave them a glance.

"I should prefer to choose my own husband," she declared.

"Really, Lydia, you say the most outrageous things. As if daughters could choose their own husbands."

"Why should they not?" her sister challenged her. Lydia's blue eyes were sparkling in anticipation of a debate. Although the girls were identical twins, the truth was, to Mrs. Reed's great sorrow, that they did not comport themselves identically. Catherine's hair was perfectly dressed with not a strand out of place. Lydia's tresses, just

as blonde, revealed stray locks that refused to be confined by pins or combs. “Do you not think that a woman knows what she wants in a husband?”

“Papa says—”

“Papa says a great many things, and Mama echoes him. But why should a woman, merely because of her sex, not have her own opinions. Mary Wollstonecraft says—”

Catherine glanced around her as if the trees might be eavesdropping. “You know

what Papa thinks of the late Mrs. Wollstonecraft. And her daughter,” she added, well aware that Mr. Reed’s opinion on the subject did not match that of his daughter.

“Mrs. Shelley has written a most fascinating novel,” Lydia defended hotly.

“You know what Papa thinks of novels, and of women who write them.”

“He has not read it,” Lydia dismissed this perspective. “It’s the story of a scientist, Dr. Frankenstein, who assembles a creature—”

“Lydia, please. You know our father’s views on this matter. I beg you not to continue to discuss it. You are oftentimes reckless in your responses and you will find yourself in his bad graces if you goad him, as you nearly did today. Bacon and eggs and what to eat first, indeed—”

Then her sense of humor took hold and she began to giggle. Lydia joined her and when the girls entered the village, they were shaking with laughter.

Gazing out from her shop window onto the street, Mrs. Allington saw the girls pass by and wondered if they would be stopping by to have a dress made. They were very easy to sew for, although it seemed terribly odd for two young ladies to dress alike. If she had the option, Mrs. Allington thought, she would dress Lydia in bold and vivid colors. The demure shades suited Catherine’s temperament, but Lydia was not docile by nature.

The bookseller, Mr. Obriot, saw them go by and smiled. No doubt

Miss Lydia would find her way into the shop; she always did, and not for the frothy novels that other young ladies favored. No, she read histories and treatises and works by scientists and philosophers of renown. He was sure that he would be seeing her soon. Miss Lydia was a rare one, and no mistake, but who was to say that women did not have brains equal to those of men?

He was well aware of what Mr. Reed's views were on the subject of women's brains. Mr. Reed was a patron of the bookstore and was indeed, a learned man whose conversation was diverting and enjoyable. But he was adamant on the subject of the inferiority of the fair sex. Mr. Obriot did not divulge what he knew about Miss Lydia Reed's taste in books, or that he frequently put aside tomes for her that would have challenged the abilities of the supposedly superior male sex in which Mr. Reed entrusted his belief.

Unaware that her friend the bookseller was mulling over her interests in reading material, Lydia accompanied her sister into the shops and the sisters accomplished their errands. But when Catherine expressed the desire to visit the milliner's shop, Lydia begged off.

"I know where you're going," Catherine said.

"And you won't tell anyone, because you are my sister and my twin."

"I won't tell anyone because I love you and don't wish to see Papa become cross at you."

The sisters grinned, happily co-conspirators in a harmless ploy. Catherine preferred tranquility and would not willingly endanger it, but she did bear a great affection for her sister and did not see why Lydia should not be allowed to read the books she favored. What did it matter if her interests ran to histories and science and other fields which were not typically enjoyed by women? There was surely no harm that could come from reading a book.

Lydia could not have explained why her preference for subjects which were disdained by others of her sex excited such interest within her. She only knew that no throbbing line of poetry by Lord Byron could invoke such a stirring within her as could a well-reasoned examination of scientific experiments. To be able to study

such matters openly, without subterfuge, would have been her greatest delight.

The closest that she could come was through the books that dear Mr. Obriot, the indulgent bookseller, put aside for her. Eagerly she opened the door to his shop.

There was a customer there, a gentleman by the looks of him, speaking to Mr. Obriot. Quietly, Lydia entered the shop. Mr. Obriot saw her enter but did not abandon his customer.

"I have spoken to him myself," the man said. He sounded young to Lydia. She could not see him; his back was to her. He was tall and carried himself well. He was dressed well but was not a dandy, that was apparent; his garb was sober in color. "I tell you, Charles Babbage is a man of whom the world shall hear with great admiration."

"But what is this 'difference engine' of which you speak?" Mr. Obriot asked with curiosity. "I have never heard of such an invention."

"One day, the entire world will know of it," the young man predicted in a voice which reflected the well-bred accents of London. "'Tis a machine that can compute astronomical and mathematical tables."

"A machine? Fancy that."

"Indeed. Mr. Babbage has completed the invention and has presented his findings to the Royal Astronomical Society only last month. The government has expressed an interest in his invention."

"So I should think," Mr. Obriot agreed. "Such a contraption would save hours of work that a man would do on his own."

"It will rival Gutenberg," the young man predicted.

"Say not that," Mr. Obriot bade him. "Where would the likes of me be without the printing press?"

The two men chuckled. "I concede your point, sir," said the young man, "and for my mind, I expect that I owe my fealty to Mr. Gutenberg for the many hours of pleasure that I have had in reading, thanks to his work. But mark me, you will be hearing of

Mr. Babbage. The day will come when Oxford will be too small for him.”

“I daresay that there are a great many such as yourself who already regard Oxford as too small for them,” Mr. Obriot said slyly. “There’s nothing like a fresh graduate to pronounce that he has outgrown the world he knows.”

“I am not, I hope so arrogant. Tonight I go to visit a gentleman who encourages young men and old alike to share their thoughts in a discussion where age and youth are held in like esteem. I go to visit Dr. Franklin Reed. Do you know him?”

Mr. Obriot’s gaze drifted to where Lydia stood, scanning the titles of the books on the table.

“I do,” he answered. “He is a patron of this shop. How came you to know him?”

“He frequently visits the university,” the young man said. “I made his acquaintance during one of those visits and he invited me, when time was accommodating, to visit him on one of his evenings. I look forward to it.”

“Yes . . . they are said to be most interesting. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to meet his family upon your visit.”

“I should not think so. The gatherings are for gentlemen only, and of course, ladies are not interested in such topics as we discuss. I should never be so rude as to approach a female with a topic that is designed to be discussed by men.

The Sisters Discuss Their Wishes

“It was infuriating, Catherine, to hear such arrogance!” Lydia was still so irate at the conversation that she had overheard that she was walking very quickly, at a pace that was much too fast for her sister, who lagged behind half a dozen steps. This required Lydia to turn around as she expounded upon the insufferable gentleman in Mr. Obriot’s shop. “Mr. Obriot opined that perhaps some ladies might relish such discussions, and the gentleman expressed his doubts. So, naturally, Mr. Obriot, who is very droll, told him that he was familiar with ladies who patronized his book shop so that they could read of the latest advances in the sciences and other fields of study commonly supposed to be of interest to gentlemen alone. The gentleman sounded as if he did not believe him.”

“Perhaps it was the thought of ladies in the plural which excited the gentleman’s disbelief,” Catherine suggested, panting as she struggled to keep up with her sister. “I would suspect that there is only one such lady, and that she is you.”

“Perhaps,” Lydia acknowledged. “I suppose it is. But even so, the fact that there is one female who would rather know more about what advances are being made in laboratories rather than the advances made in Lady Caroline Lamb’s boudoir—“

“I believe that Lady Caroline’s unfortunate affair with Lord Byron has been over for some time,” Catherine murmured. “In any case, it is a matter about which neither you nor I should know anything.”

“Obviously, we both know about it!” Lydia retorted. “Do you never tire of living two lives, Catherine? One which is for the pleasing of our father, and the other which carries on entirely in our own unexpressed wishes?”

"I don't see it as such, Lydia," Catherine said. "Do slow down, please, so that we may talk face to face. I'm afraid that you shall turn an ankle and fall, walking backwards."

Obligingly, Lydia adopted a slower pace so that the sisters could converse as they walked together, returning home from the village. Lydia had a book, wrapped up as a package, with her. It was further concealed within a package which was one of the ones her mother had requested that they pick up. Once inside their house, Lydia would surreptitiously take the book from its hiding place and, concealing it, take it to her room so that no one would know that it was in her possession. She had not bought the book, but Mr. Obriot trusted her with it, knowing that she would treat it with the utmost care as she read and return it to him as soon as she had finished reading it.

"How can you not see it so?" Lydia demanded.

"Because you are the one so dissatisfied with the options ahead, not me. I want to marry and have a family. I have no ambition to join the gentlemen in their conversations about matters in which I have not the slightest interest. I realize that to you, such things are paramount, but they are not so to me. Dear Lydia, you are my beloved sister, my twin sister, and I wish you the happiness you seek, but we do not wish for the same ends."

"But how—"

Catherine held up her hands. "Do not, pray, hector me. We are alike in our features and our forms, but our minds diverge. I admire you for your knowledge, although I cannot but worry that it will be injurious to your health."

"How can knowing things do me harm?"

"I am not at all sure that the female mind is designed to comprehend such weighty matters," Catherine said earnestly. "Eve was created from Adam's rib, you know."

"I don't see what that has to do with anything," her sister replied in cross tones. "Adam wasn't pondering anything weightier than sin and an unfortunate bite from an apple."

Catherine began to smile. "I should think that pondering sin when it

led to the fall of man would be weighty enough,” she suggested.

Despite herself, Lydia began to smile. “I must agree with you,” she said. “But as he blamed Eve, I cannot spare any pity for him.”

“But Eve was the one who sinned first,” protested Catherine worriedly, fearful that her outspoken sister would unwittingly add blasphemy to her philosophical exploration.

“Yes, but Adam was not bound to do the same. He could have resisted. After all, if he, as a man, was so much stronger in his moral rectitude, why did he succumb?” Lydia asked in triumph.

“I don’t know, Lydia,” Catherine replied wearily. It was exhausting, at times, to maintain a conversation with Lydia when she was vociferous in her stance either for or against something. Catherine was genuinely worried that one day, Papa would discover that Lydia was reading material of which he disapproved, and engaging in conversations which he would find offensive. What would he do, she feared, if he discovered that his daughter was deliberately disobeying him? “Does it matter? We all must pay the consequences for his weakness.”

“Then you concede that he was weak!”

“I—yes, I suppose he was, he was Eve’s husband and he ought to have stood up to the devil.”

“I wonder why he did not do so?” Lydia mused.

“I don’t know and you are not going to be able to find out. No theologian or scholar, be he ever so wise, was present at the episode and thus cannot relay to us what transpired.”

“More’s the pity. Think of what we could have learned had someone been present then,” Lydia marveled. “Our complete knowledge of mortal sin might be clarified.”

“I should not think clarification is needed!” Catherine returned. “I myself have found no ambiguity in the matter.”

“No, but that is because you are content.”

“Is that so wrong?”

"No," Lydia said. "I wish I were content. Instead, I read books that are forbidden to me and must hide the fact that I do so. I am expected to converse in inanities because gentlemen, including our father, doubt that we have the ability to discuss matters of great import. We are relegated to the shadows instead of standing forth in the light."

"We marry and have children. I do not think that counts as the shadows," Catherine disagreed.

"We are not in Parliament, even though one of our greatest monarchs, Elizabeth the First, was a woman. We do not serve in the army, even though Queen Boadicea was surely proof that a woman may, if needed to be, as martial as a man. We do not sail ships, even though Anne Bonney and Mary Read were pirates in their time. The list of what we do not do is endless, and only because we are not permitted to do these things. We do not go to university," Lydia continued, her fair skin rosy with the emotions she conjured by her discussion. "There is no proof that we cannot maintain a knowledgeable discourse, and yet we are denied the ability to further our quest in the universities where men are admitted."

"Dear Lydia," Catherine said gently, "this is simply how things are and we cannot change them. You will surely be content, one day, if you accept the limitations that are inherently placed upon us because of our sex."

"And if I do not accept those limitations?" Lydia demanded.

"I am afraid that you will never find a husband and thus you will never have your own home where, even if you are subjected to the prejudices of your husband, you are mistress. Otherwise, you will forever be subject to Papa's rules, as if you were a child, with never a hope of independence."

Lydia stared wonderingly at her sister. Did Catherine, too, chafe at the domination of their father who, loving and well-meaning though he was, regarded them as frail beings who depended upon his sagacity for their survival? It was a bold thought, and one she had never entertained. Catherine was always so malleable, so quick to agree with Papa and so intent on pleasing him and acceding to his wishes. Did that acquiescence hide a desire for independence

which was, perhaps, just as powerful as Lydia's, although masked by Catherine's docility? It was a departure from the view that Lydia held of her sister, but perhaps, perhaps, Catherine, too, was a rebel. Were there other women who, content with their role as wives and mothers, were perhaps not at all content with their duty as daughters?

The sisters walked on in silence. It was a tranquil silence; there was not discord between them. Each was occupied with her own thoughts. But for Lydia, the revelation that perhaps even Catherine yearned for more than their father's approval was quite novel. It made her feel as though, even if they did not seek the same definition of their destinies, they each sought a freedom which was currently denied to them.

Lydia's Solitude

Papa was busy in his study, preparing for his guests, and Mama was making sure that all would be in order for their visitor. Catherine was at the piano, going over the music that she would be asked to play when she, Lydia and their parents responded to the invitation to dine at Squire Melchett's a week hence. Lydia took advantage of her privacy to go to her bedroom.

Locking the door, she then went to the window seat with the book that Mr. Obrito had loaned to her. The afternoon light was still sufficient to read by; the summer days were long and pleasant, a joy to Lydia, who detested being cooped up inside when the weather was inclement. When she was out of doors, as she often was, she delighted in exploring the natural world which held such fascinating secrets. There, no one cared about beaux or balls or how one did one's hair or whether one's dress was in fashion. The bees and butterflies who found their sustenance in the flowers which were in riotous bloom during the summer months maintained their own decorum, one which was, in its own way, a courtship as well, but one upon which the humans depended, though they did not realize it. The rabbits which darted out in the open as if they thought they might be invisible from view, the birds which chirped their morning songs from the branches, the squirrels which raced up and down the tree trunks, all had their roles to play and they performed their tasks without confusion.

Lydia could not be bothered to sketch drawings of vases of flowers or paint watercolors of a bowl of fruit, but she eagerly set forth with her pencil to recreate the strange and macabre intricacy of a spider with a doomed insect trapped in the web. She drew not as an artist, but as a scientist, capturing the details as she could see them in her desire to learn more about them. The natural world was one of harmony; although it was based upon predator and prey, there was an order within its function that was logical. Lydia did not see

how the human realm, with its artifice and posturing, could possibly be excused for its folly. She and Mr. Obriot often conversed on the matter; although she knew that the bookseller made allowances for her youth, he did not condescend to her when they spoke on such matters. The human world, Mr. Obriot said, was evil by intention; the natural world was neither evil or good. It simply sought to survive. Surviving had its own rules.

Even so, Mr. Obriot did not see the two domains, that of nature and that of humans, as entirely dissimilar. He had reminded her that in the winged world, it was the male bird who bore the more colorful plumage. Not unlike, he had commented in his wry way, the London Corinthians who pranced about in their elaborate waistcoats and cravats, the better to attract the ladies. Lydia had laughed at his comparison, but did not dispute his premise.

Father seldom took them to London, preferring the village of Castlemaine for its bucolic charm and its proximity to Oxford, which was an easy ride of short distance along well-maintained roads. Lydia had no interest in the haut monde or its doings and her sister enjoyed the stories of the debutantes, the dandies, and their exploits. For Lydia, London was another realm and Oxford was the epicenter of her geographical aspirations. Papa, although he went to Oxford regularly, seldom brought his daughters or his wife with him.

She vividly recalled each time they had gone there. The city of Oxford, dominated by the university, had captured her dreams. One day, she hoped to live there, and she hoped to visit London as well. How this was to happen, she could not say. Papa did not intend to seek scholars for his daughters' marital prospects, but she was not quite sure why. Even scholars required domesticity, surely. But she did not wish to be the one whose task it was to create a harmonious nest in which a husband could pursue his studies while his wife managed the household.

Gloomily, Lydia considered her future. It was very well for Catherine; any husband would do if all she wanted was to oversee her own household and raise a family. She would be biddable in love. But what sort of husband would Papa regard as suitable for her, disapproving as he did of Lydia's vocal opinions and independent thoughts?

She opened the book. It was not the first time that she had sought solace in pages. It was a book on anatomy. Eagerly, Lydia began to read and as she did so, the troubles of her situation faded and she was enraptured by the author's account of the human body's circulatory system. To Lydia, the eloquence with which the author discussed the travels of the blood through arteries and veins, reaching its destinations, was akin to a Homeric saga. Lovers could cherish their sonnets; she preferred this for her poetry.

She read quickly, intent upon returning Mr. Obriot's book soon. He would enjoy her thoughts on it and he would tell prospective buyers of the book that another reader—unnamed, of course, for no one could credit that a woman would read such a book—had found this or that part of the narrative particularly meritorious. Mr. Obriot appreciated her views on the books he loaned to her and he had been frank in expressing his thanks. He could not read all the books he sold, but because Lydia had such particular tastes, he could count on her to familiarize him with those that he had not read.

When she realized that it had become harder to see the words, she was surprised to discover that dusk had fallen and the world outside the window seat was swathed in soft gray shades, preparing for the night to fall. She closed the book and returned it to its packaging, then put it back in the drawer of her *escritoire*. Glancing out the window, she saw a horseman approach. Butler, the stable lad, appeared to attend to the man's horse. As he dismounted, she noted with interest that the early visitor was none other than the gentleman from the book shop who had been so dismissive of women's ability to understand difficult subject matters. Apparently his eagerness to attend the evening's discussion was not feigned; he was early.

Because she was not trying to be unobserved, as had been the case in the book shop, she was able to study him as he left his horse in Butler's care and walked up the wide stone stairs that led to the front of the Reed house. He walked with a purposeful gait, intent on his errand. She could not tell much about his appearance; his fashionable beaver hat concealed his face, but from what she could see, he looked to be a man of some distinction. He had told Mr. Obriot that he had recently graduated from Oxford. Surely, unless he was blessed with independent means, he would be seeking

employment in some profession. Papa's inheritance allowed him to pursue his intellectual interests without the need of employment, but not all gentlemen were so fortunate.

Perhaps the young man hoped that her father would be willing to help him in his pursuit of a profession; he had done so in the past, speaking on behalf of a youth of ability who sought the endorsement of Dr. Franklin Reed. Perhaps her father would consider him as a marital prospect for Catherine. He had made his views on women and their inability to match the intellectual abilities of men perfectly clear. Catherine would not mind such a perception; she agreed with that opinion.

It was all very well, Lydia decided as she closed the curtains to the approaching night and got up to light the lamps in her room. Catherine was welcome to him, but if this were her father's intent, and she had no knowledge that it was, Lydia did not intend to be a mealy-mouthed sister-in-law. The young Oxford gentleman would learn that although the two sisters looked exactly alike, they did not share the same identical manners of thinking. Moreover, it would give Lydia great delight, at such times as she would visit her sister if she did marry the gentleman, to present topics at the table which would flout convention.

Of course, Lydia reminded herself, she did not know what plans her father had for finding husbands for his daughters. For all she knew, he might very well intend to marry her off to the arrogant young Oxonian! That would never do, she thought as she took out her journal in order to compose her thoughts on the book she was reading. It had become a habit of hers, as covert and revealing as a diary, to record her thoughts on the books that Mr. Obriot lent to her to read, so that she would have an account of what she had learned. It was a far cry from studying at Oxford, but she endeavored to write in a clear, concise, scholarly manner, so that she did justice to the works as she read them.

It was not a wifely talent. It was not something that a typical husband might value. But it had merit to Lydia, and she intended to please herself.

Lydia Eavesdrops

Although she had retired for the night, Lydia found that sleep would not come to her. Her mind was too full of the day's conversations: her father's indulgent tone as he spoke of choosing husbands for his daughters; Mr. Obriot's shrewd discourse as he spoke with the young gentleman from Oxford in such a way that allowed Lydia to know that he was aware of her presence; the young gentleman's thoughtless insults against the capacity of women to understand matters of greater significance than those encountered in their domestic routines; Catherine's furtive and perhaps unrecognized rebellion against filial duty; and her own restlessness. It was often this way when she was reading one of the books from Mr. Obriot's shop; to have so many ideas suddenly unleashed in her brain, with no hope of ever being able to pursue any of them with the disciplined study that a man could allow, was exasperating.

She remembered how Nanny had always prescribed a cup of chamomile tea when the girls were unable to sleep. The hot, soothing beverage had eased their distress, whether they felt mildly ill or their day's activities had been too exuberant or they were upset because they had misbehaved and earned their parents' displeasure. A cup of hot tea was just the thing, Lydia decided as she tossed away the bed-covers. She would simply slip downstairs and go down to the kitchen. The gentlemen in Papa's study would still be engrossed in their discussion and no one would notice that she was up.

The house was silent and everyone abed but the gentlemen in Papa's study and Howland, the butler, who waited up so that he could attend to the guests, refreshing their drinks and performing whatever service was needed for their comfort, as Papa was a generous host.

The kitchen was dark but Lydia and Catherine had spent much time

there when they were young, indulged by the household staff who delighted in the pranks the girls played upon them as twins, testing to see if they could correctly identify which girl was before them. The girls had never been able to determine how the servants were always able to guess correctly, not realizing until years later that although their appearance was identical, their personalities were not.

Lydia was smiling at those pleasant memories as, teacup in hand, she left the kitchen. It was then that an imp of mischief seized hold of her. As she was not in the least sleepy, why not eavesdrop upon her father and his guests?

Papa's study was the first chamber in the corridor leading off from the entrance way on the first floor. On either side of the study was a small, built-in bench, carved into the walls. Mrs. Reed had prevailed upon Papa to allow her to place large, ornate vases filled with plumes in front of the seats so that the servants would not take the opportunity for idleness when they were supposed to be cleaning. Carefully, Lydia gently moved the tall plumes so that she could fit behind them and take her seat, putting them back in place so that she was unseen.

Thus situated, Lydia giggled to herself, taking a sip of tea and leaning closer to the study door so that she could hear the conversation. At first, she could not distinguish sentences because the gentlemen were speaking with great vigor, and some heat, about the topic under discussion. All she could hear were snippets of words which did not point to clarity. Then one voice, rising above the rest but in projection rather than volume, spoke.

"My learned gentlemen, I pray you to consider the concept and not the morality of the premise. Only think what we could accomplish if the circumstances I have raised were possible and not a premise in a novel. If we could substitute healthy limbs and organs for those which have proven diseased, think what advantages we could seek! Imagine, if you will, the brave young soldier who has lost his fighting arm in service of his country. Think of his future; it is a dire one. How will he support his family and earn his keep? By begging, most likely. But if science could provide him with a new arm, reattaching all the muscles and ligaments which provide strength and mobility to that arm, he would regain his ability to

provide for himself and those who are dependent upon him. Would not such a triumph be remarkable?"

It was the young man from Mr. Obriot's shop! Lydia recognized his voice.

"Remarkable! Remarkable indeed, young man, but also blasphemous! God has not ordained us to undo what he has done. If a man loses his arm, it is his fate and not for us to interfere."

"Did not our Lord heal? Did he not bring sight to the blind and movement to the lame?"

"Indeed, Charles," Lydia recognized her father's voice, "but he did not stitch body parts together." Papa's tone was indulgent, showing tolerance for the zeal of a young man who, in his view, spoke fancifully.

Charles. So that was the young man's name.

"No, sir," Charles conceded respectfully. "But our Lord, being the Son of God, did not need to employ such mundane methods as we mere humans would be obliged to use. His touch alone was sufficient to work the miracle."

"He did, upon occasion, use mud," Papa reminded. "And spittle."

"There are many accounts in the gospels which amaze and confound us, sir," Charles went on. "I cannot explain the will of the Divine; I would not try. It is enough that our Lord told us that we would go on to do greater things than even he had done, and that God designed us to be a little less than the angels."

"You are most persuasive," said another voice, unfamiliar to Lydia. "I shall be interested in hearing more about this prospect, but I confess that I would rather read of it in a reputable journal written by an expert and not in a novel from the febrile mind of a woman."

"And such a woman!" said another voice. "She comes from radical stock, and has promulgated the mania by marrying a man of no morals whatsoever."

They were speaking of Mrs. Shelley! Someone had read her novel! Lydia leaned even closer; the plumes brushed her nose and made her nose twitch.

"She is a widow now," Charles said. "Mr. Shelly drowned in a storm in the Gulf of Spezia not three weeks ago."

"I should not like to speak ill of one who has gone to meet his Maker," said one of the gentlemen, "but Shelley was a heathen and a wastrel. His poetry, if one wishes to call it that, is not fit to be read. He was a man of ungoverned appetites and one can only hope that his comrade, Lord Byron, will see the error of his own sinful ways and tread a different path in the future. I pray, also, that Mrs. Shelley will abandon her notions and her writing and leave such things to the talents of men. Her work may be fiction, but I fear that it shall excite an unrealistic expectation of what humans can do, in defiance of the will of God."

"We could debate the will of God all night," Papa said in a calm voice, "and not come to agreement. But we must leave such a discussion for another night. Gentlemen, the hour is late, and although our streets are generally safe, it is not wise to tempt fickle fate if ruffians are about—"

Realizing that they were about to end the evening, Lydia hastily scrambled out of her hiding place and raced back up the stairs. Just as she reached the top of the staircase, she heard the study door open.

"I hope that you will come again, Charles," Papa said. "We are much enriched by your addition to our circle."

"I hope, sir, that I did not offend your guests."

"Nonsense, no such thing. We meet here to discuss freely, with no intent to offend and no eagerness to be offended. We must embrace ideas through discussion, must we not? Is there an idea so inflammatory that gentlemen of reason and learning cannot dissect it?"

"I should hope not, Dr. Reed. I am much in your debt for inviting me and I shall anticipate with eagerness the next gathering."

"We meet weekly, my lad. Of course, not everyone can come to every gathering, but we always have a goodly assortment of our regulars. Now, tell me, how is your search coming along?"

"Dr. Whitby has agreed to take me on, sir, as his assistant. I thank

you for the recommendation.”

“Excellent; you will learn much from him, and he will benefit from having a young apprentice to take over when he is ready to retire, which, he tells me, will be in several years. It is a superb opportunity for you both. So tell me, when will Dr. Charles Allen be honoring Castlemaine with his presence?”

“I must conclude some of my private matters, sir, and I have told Dr. Whitby that I will join him officially by the end of the year or sooner if I can.”

“Not too far from now, then. I am glad to hear it. Dr. Whitby will welcome your new ideas and you will profit from his experience. The village will benefit from having two doctors to serve us when we are ill.”

“It is thanks to you, sir, that this will come to pass.”

“Perhaps, but it is your own ability and talent which would have persuaded Whitby to take you on. Remember, next week, we shall look forward to having you join us.”

“Yes, sir, and thank you again, for your hospitality.”

“Good night, Charles, and travel safely back to Oxford. It’s a clear night; I doubt that you will encounter any trouble on your route.”

Dining with the Melchetts

“And what about you, Lydia dear? Will you accompany your sister’s exquisite playing with a song?”

“I would, Mrs. Melchett, did I not fear that I would send you and your guests running from the drawing room with their hands over their ears in protest. I have not my sister’s musical skill.”

Mrs. Melchett smiled indulgently. “I am sure that you are too modest, my dear.”

“Indeed, no. Tell her, Mama, why it is that I do not sing hymns during church and why I abstain from singing entirely.”

“Lydia’s talents are elsewhere,” Mrs. Reed said hurriedly, eager to stave off Lydia’s conversational direction lest it head in a direction which would bode ill for the tranquil atmosphere of the guests. She did not fear that her daughter would be rude, for both girls had been brought up to be unfailingly courteous when they were guests in the homes of others, but Lydia was wont to be honest and that, Mrs. Reed had discovered, could often be interpreted as a lack of manners.

“Really? How extraordinary,” Mrs. Melchett said. “You are both identical in looks, one would guess that you were a matched set in talents as well.”

“Catherine is far my superior in talents,” Lydia replied.

As if she had heard her name being spoken, Catherine looked up from the piano and smiled at her sister as she continued to play without interruption.

“It’s so unexpected. I must remember that although you look alike, you are not the same.”

“Perhaps our likeness in our attire confuses you,” Lydia suggested

innocently.

"Very likely," Mrs. Melchett agreed. "Do you never think of dressing differently?"

"I do," Lydia said promptly.

"But it gives me such pleasure to see them, just as they were when they were children," Mrs. Reed said, "dressed the same."

"Yes, perhaps," Mrs. Melchett said vaguely. "Although I wonder if, perhaps, that will be an impediment to courtship, when your father decides that it is a suitable time for you girls to begin to entertain your beaux?"

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Reed asked worriedly as Lydia listened with alacrity, wondering if it could be possible that Mrs. Melchett's observations might prove fruitful.

"You know how young men are, Mrs. Reed. So slow to make up their minds unless they are prodded in just the right way, with just the right nudge. My sons would not have thought of marriage had not I pushed at precisely the right time. If a young man cannot distinguish the object of his affections, he may be disinclined to offer for one of the girls. That would be a shame; you are beauties," Mrs. Melchett said with a smile. "You and Catherine could have your pick of any of the young men in the village, of course. But if they cannot tell one of you from the other, it may impede their pursuit. That would be such a shame. I should not like to see such comely young ladies wither on the vine, merely due to the fact that a suitor cannot decide which of you is which because you are both dressed the same."

"I had not thought . . . I must consult Mr. Reed for his views on the matter."

"Of course. But he will tell you to do as you please. Men cannot be bothered with details of a woman's wardrobe; the Squire looks quite pained when I tell him that I need new frocks. It is not that he would deny me; he simply cannot bear the process. He is likely to say that something looks perfectly fine on me, merely to bring matters to an end. Men are very exasperating, are they not? Like children, sometimes."

Mrs. Reed was nodding in such vehement agreement that Lydia's eyes opened wide. Was this her mother, who seemed to hang upon every word that Papa said as if it had been sent by divine inspiration, agreeing that men were not gods?

"You will learn, my dear Lydia, when you are married, that the most efficacious way to have a happy marriage is to agree with what your husband says when he says it, so that he is convinced that you and he are in accord, and then to do as you intended. When he upbraids you for your error, your option is to cry; men loathe making a woman cry. You can achieve whatever you want in that fashion."

Lydia looked to her mother. "Crying is one method," Mrs. Reed agreed. "The other is to convince him that it was his idea in the first place. That is to be used when there is something in particular that you want to do, but you know that he will dispute you on the intention. But with deft handling, a husband can be brought round."

"Do you never tire of such machinations?" Lydia asked. "Would you not prefer to be open and direct with your husbands?"

Both women looked at her as if she had uttered the words of a madwoman. "How on earth could a woman manage that, my dear?" Mrs. Melchett said. "Men must be managed. If you approach a man openly, he will refute you on principle because the suggestion was not his own. Men dearly relish their sovereignty, you see. No, I must advise you, as your dear mother will support, to manage your husband with sweet words and blandishments, occasional tears and perhaps, but only when you are quite sure of your methods, a pout. You will get what you want and your husband will congratulate himself on his intuition."

"It sounds very laborious," Lydia said. Catherine continued at the piano, her expression intent upon her music as the guests in the drawing room enjoyed her playing. Edward Melchett, standing at her side to turn the pages of the music, stared at Catherine with undisguised adoration. Was he one of the suitors that Mrs. Melchett had spoken of? Would Papa think him a worthy suitor for Catherine? He was the youngest son, and his inheritance would be minimal. Was Catherine unaware of Edward's rapt gaze upon her as she played?

It seemed to Lydia that Edward would not need to be pushed into asking Papa for permission to call upon Catherine, despite what Mrs. Melchett said regarding the need to manage men.

“Now, then, Lydia,” Mrs. Melchett said briskly. “You have claimed that you do not have talents to share with the guests. But I think that you are being far too modest. Modesty is becoming in a young woman, to be sure, but remember that if we do not shine a light upon ourselves, we remain in shadow. If you do not play or sing, do you paint?”

“No, I have no talent in that direction either.”

“I know that your sister dances beautifully. Is that a twin talent for Castelemaine’s twins?”

“I am clumsy and I dance poorly, although I do love to dance,” Lydia said. “But no gentleman is going to offer for me because I have impressed him with my graceful airs.”

“Really? But you cannot be without attributes, my dear. It remains to be seen what they are, so that you can display them to advantage.”

Lydia thought of the praying mantis that she had drawn in her sketchbook earlier in the week. She had sat in the garden, oblivious to the stains that would mar her dress, and watched as the inhabitants of the out-of-doors went about their bucolic business. It had been a fascinating passage of time, and she had sketched as the insects, birds, and creatures, lulled by her stillness, had behaved as if she were not there.

Beside her, Lydia could feel her mother tense with apprehension at the thought of what Lydia might be about to say.

“No,” she said. She sensed her mother’s relief. “I regret my lack of talents. However, I do appreciate the abilities of others and nothing gives me more pleasure than to enjoy the talents of those who share them. Catherine’s playing provides me with delight.”

“You are a girl of generous heart, Lydia,” Mrs. Melchett said with approval. “Not all young ladies, I regret to say, are so bountiful in their praise of others.”

“Catherine is my sister,” Lydia said with disbelief. “I could never withhold praise from her, nor she from me.”

“Then you are fortunate in your daughters, Mrs. Reed. I know of sisters in our very community whose words scratch one another like warring cats.”

“The girls have always been so,” Mrs. Reed said. “Their father and I count ourselves blessed in our offspring.”

Catherine Attracts a Suitor

“Your playing must have been divinely inspired, truly,” Lydia confided to Catherine that night, after they had returned home and were sharing their thoughts on the evening in Lydia’s bedroom. “Mama told Mrs. Melchett that she and Papa consider themselves to be blessed having us as daughters. Fancy, she used the plural. I should have expected her to say that they were blessed in one daughter—that would be you—and cursed with the other, that being me. But she did not. And when Mrs. Melchett suggested that you and I ought not to dress in the same fashion, because it might put off prospective suitors, Mama appeared to consider the suggestion and not dismiss it out of hand. And not only that—you cannot conceive of this, Catherine, but I vow I heard it with my own ears—she agreed when Mrs. Melchett said that men must be handled. They proceeded to instruct me in the manner in which husbands are to be managed. Can you credit such a thing? Mama, giving up her secrets and revealing that when she wants to achieve something, she actually plots to do so. When I asked if it were not quite laborious to employ such tactics it was clear that they felt I was unaware.”

Catherine laughed. “It is vastly entertaining to think that women, who we believe are inferior to men, are actually controlling them unawares. I am quite certain that Papa has no idea that Mama, who is always so deferential and obliging to him, is proceeding on her own course with the intention of swaying him without his knowing it. You seem to have enjoyed a most illuminating conversation at the Melchetts.”

“Very illuminating. And I was also in a most advantageous position to observe Mr. Edward Melchett as he turned the pages of your music for you.”

Catherine reddened. “Mr. Melchett was very helpful,” she said, her gaze lowered.

"Mr. Melchett did not take his eyes off you while you were playing. I marvel that he turned the pages in a timely fashion and did not lag behind the notes. You surely must have been aware of his gaze upon you."

"I--he was very helpful. I was a guest in his home and I suppose he was fulfilling his duties as host."

"Mrs. Melchett said that she had prodded her older sons into marriage when the time was right. I wonder if perhaps she feels that, with regard to his steadfast attention to you this night, she is primed to prod."

"I should not like to think that a gentleman decided to court my affections because he required the influence of his mother," Catherine declared.

Lydia put her arm around her sister. "My dear Catherine," she intoned, invoking Mrs. Melchett's speech, "there is a great world of information of which you—and I, to tell the truth—are unaware, with respect to the wiles of women, wives, and mothers. I wonder that men have not discovered it. I think that Mr. Edward Melchett but awaits the approval of the parents, at this stage."

"Do you think that Papa would approve of him?" Catherine asked urgently. "He is not the heir, after all, and his prospects may be limited."

"He is of a good family, he lives in the neighborhood and would doubtless agree to live here when married until such time as he had achieved his own position. He has no vices that are whispered of and he is pleasant in manner and feature."

"You sound as if you are writing his advertisement," Catherine laughed.

"I own that I begin to wonder if perhaps all that transpires around us is not engineered by unseen hands, and people that we know are not what we know them to be."

"You sound very philosophical." Catherine rose. "I am to bed."

"Perhaps, tomorrow, there will be a visit from Mr. Melchett."

"Perhaps."

Lydia had proven to be correct in her prediction. Mr. Edward Melchett did call upon Dr. Reed, meeting with him in the study. Catherine was anxious when Lydia told her the news.

"I wonder what Papa will say," she fretted. "He seems to know what he wants us to have in a husband but we don't know what those requisites are."

"I cannot imagine that he will object," Lydia said. She wanted to go outside for her daily sketching; since she had begun to take notice of the habits of the outside world which was often unseen, she found herself riveted to the marvelous intricacies which were revealed. Anthills and spider webs and bee hives were intriguing; animals which scurried to their burrows and winged creatures which flew to their nests all had their own unique schedules and as she studied them, she felt as if she were beginning to know them as fellow occupants of the land.

But she could not leave Catherine now in a state of apprehension as she waited to find out what their father had decided to do in response to Edward Melchett's suit.

They soon found out.

"Miss, your father wishes to see you in his study." The news came from Callie, the maid, who had been sent by Dr. Reed with instructions to fetch Catherine.

Catherine's hands went to her hair. "Thank you, Callie. Please let him know that I will be there directly. Lydia, do I look presentable?"

"As you always do," Lydia said warmly, standing up so that she could hug her sister. "I hope that Mr. Melchett will bring what you desire."

After Catherine had left her room, Lydia returned to the window seat to gaze out upon the landscape beyond the glass. It was a pleasant, late-summer day. The sun was still bright and warm; only the evenings gave a hint that soon, autumn would arrive, and with it, shorter days and longer nights. There would be fewer opportunities, as the weather turned, for days spent outside, studying the habits of the creatures and insects who dwell in the

soil and air. The flowers would die and the trees would be bereft of leaves.

Catherine would marry. What would that be like? For years, Lydia had chafed at the confinement of being perceived as only a twin, half of a person, with no opportunity to establish her own identity. But she and her sister were, in some ways, two parts of a whole. Lydia realized that now. When Catherine married, she would be sharing her life with her husband. Even if they did continue to live under the Reed roof, Catherine's life would travel in another direction, one which centered upon her husband and eventually children and a home of her own.

What was there for Lydia? Should she be satisfied for Papa to find a husband for her, even if she and the gentleman did not suit, merely so that she too could achieve independence? Could she go on as she had been, furtively borrowing books from Mr. Obriot to read in secret? Would she be able to sate her hunger for learning by continuing to eavesdrop upon her father's weekly gatherings with his scholarly friends? Was it enough to live half a life, different from the halving that was part of being a twin? What was there for her?

To her surprise, Lydia felt tears well up in her eyes. It seemed as though what life offered for her would only be a proxy existence rather than the fullness that she craved. She wanted to learn, to dive deeply into the mysteries of science and the frontiers of philosophy, so that she could, like the gentlemen in Papa's study, conduct their theoretical romances with ideas. It was selfish of them to hoard that freedom and deny it to women.

Mr. Charles Allen did not realize how fortunate he was in his trousers and his boots and his hat, to be born a male so that there was no one to question or challenge his right to find answers to anything that provoked his curiosity. He could sit in Papa's study, contributing to the discussion and she could not, just because of her sex. There was no one to whom she could share her despair, and if Catherine was in love and became engaged to wed Mr. Melchett, Lydia would lose that solace as well.

Lydia is discovered

It was harder now to be comfortable as she perched in the hidden spot by Papa's study so that she could listen in as the gentlemen had their weekly gatherings. The earlier arrival of darkness made it easier to slip downstairs because the rest of the household retired sooner, but there was no fire in the entrance way and Lydia was obliged, when she settled into her spot, to drape herself in a shawl, with a blanket over her knees, in order to stay warm. Still, it was cozy in its fashion, as she sat with her cup of tea, listening to the gentlemen discuss matters. Across from where she was seated, the tall floor sconces were lit, casting the soft, flickering illumination of candlelight across the length of the room.

Tonight, in addition to her cup of tea, she had cut a slice from the loaf of bread that Mrs. Landon had baked. A missing slice would not be noticed and she was careful to leave no traces of her presence in the kitchen. She was not concerned that the servants would be troubled if they knew that she had taken food, but she didn't want anyone to be accused of thievery. The Reeds were not demanding employers but Mrs. Landon governed the kitchen staff firmly and missing food would have been detected.

The discussion was already underway. The gentlemen were talking about the Greek war of independence against the Ottoman Turks. Lydia, over the weeks of listening in on the conversations, had begun to recognize the voices and could identify them by name. Mr. Salisbury, an elderly, opinionated gentleman who generally disapproved of whatever the topic under discussion might be, was of the mind that no good would come of it. Charles Allen was respectfully disagreeing with him.

"The Greeks, sir, are the midwives to our civilization," Charles said with courtesy. "Where would we be without their principles of philosophy and government?"

"We would be just as we are," Salisbury returned. "Englishmen have the capacity to comprehend such concepts. But the Greek of today is not Plato, my young scholar, and it's no use trying to graft those ancient principles, however we revere them, onto a society which has passed its prime. The Ottoman Empire represents all the debauchery and indolence of the East and the Greeks have imbibed that intoxicating brew. Independence is designed for those who can most appreciate it and tend to the flames, that they stay warm, but not so hot as to become a conflagration as was the case in France."

"You refer, I assume, to the war for independence which was fought victoriously by our American cousins," Charles suggested mildly.

Lydia, who by now had come to detect all the nuances in the conversations which revealed much of the gentlemen's true thoughts, snickered quietly. She knew by his conversation that Charles, while no Jacobin, was more liberal in his thinking than was Mr. Salisbury.

"I do not, sir!" thundered the elderly gentleman. "The Americans were like wayward children objecting to the rules of the nursery and the discipline which a firm parent must impose upon them. Let them frolic with their supposed independence; they shall soon find themselves in turmoil, and they will turn to the mother country again as a child does to its mater. We shall take them back, but not with such temperate dispositions as we were wont to have during the early days of their disobedience, oh, no. They must be taught a lesson!"

"I am intrigued at your suggestion that the Americans will seek to return to their status as a colony when they have clearly gone to great lengths to devise a system of government which disdains the monarchy," Charles went on, his tone of voice moderate and respectful.

"Pah! A system of government which celebrates the yokel and the oaf. I recall that Mr. Jefferson, their supposed genius of the quill, was said to answer the door to the president's residence himself, and in his carpet slippers. Can you imagine the King doing such a thing?"

"I think that, perhaps, the late King, given his madness, might have

done such and more, but while the current King George cannot be said to universally please, he would not, I agree, greet guests so attired,” interposed Dr. Reed.

Lydia realized that her father had adroitly deflected the stances of both his guests, acknowledging that George III might have done any number of inexplicable things, given the state of his mind, but that his son, while despised in many quarters, was sufficiently royal to maintain the grandeur of his role. She had never before had cause to recognize his talent in this area, but it was impressive.

“I think that when the history of Great Britain is being writ,” said another man, “there will be little to say of the House of Hanover that brings credit to our nation.”

“The Dukes, true, have little to recommend them. I wonder if the girl-child, should she become the heir, will alter that pattern.”

“She’s but a babe,” another man said dismissively. “And a girl.”

“As was Elizabeth I,” Charles supplied.

Charles seemed to be in a provocative mood tonight, Lydia observed. It was the argument that she herself would have made, had she been in the room and she was pleasantly surprised to hear Charles utter it.

“Yes, well, times were different then. A woman on the throne is not a point of pride for a nation as great as this one. I shudder to think what will happen should she become the heir,” Mr. Salisbury said.

“Do you not think that the rush to matrimony of Clarence and Kent was rather a debacle?” asked Charles. “Middle-aged men rushing to the altar in order to supply the kingdom with an heir? I wonder that the nations of Europe did not titter at us for such folly.”

The conversation had reached a rapid-fire pace, so much so that it was difficult to hear the different voices as they spoke. Lydia rose from the bench and abandoned her hidden perch so that, tiptoeing closer, she could listen at the door. Until tonight, the discourses had been lively but also quite civil. Tonight’s exchange held a tone of discord that heightened the stakes of the conversation and the opinions that were voiced.

"I suppose you think that Britain ought to have abandoned our monarchical heritage and chosen the republican system that you seem to favor?"

"Oh, no," Charles disagreed. "I cannot imagine what the members of the royal family would do if they were turned out. They have no skills, no ability to earn a living. It would be a very bad thing for British prestige if our dukes and princesses were dependent upon alms."

"I do not like your tone, young man," Mr. Salisbury said. "I suspect that you harbor radical notions which would undermine this nation's greatness."

"Indeed, sir, I do not, and I beg your leave if I have offended you. I greatly respect your judgment and your views and if I have seemed to do otherwise, I pray you, accept my apology."

"My dear Charles," her father said, "we gather to share our opinions and no one would ask you to muffle yours. Is that not so, Avery?"

"I never said that the boy cannot express his views. I merely point out that some of our cherished institutions deserve reverence rather than insolence," Mr. Salisbury responded, his intonation churlish rather than tolerant.

"I ought to be leaving, in any case. I have an early appointment on the morrow, and had best get to bed."

Lydia, hearing these words from Charles, began to hasten back to her hidden perch, but just as the study door opened, the heel of her shoe became entangled in the hem of her dress, and she tumbled onto the floor, sprawled beneath the startled gaze of Charles Allen and the thunderous visage of her father.

Lydia thought only of escape from those commanding male gazes. She scrambled to her feet and raced up the staircase as if she were pursued by demons, rushing to her bedroom and closing the door behind her. Then she burst into sobbing, knowing that her humiliation was complete. Charles Allen had seen her at her very worst, and her father knew that she had secretly been listening in on his gatherings with his intellectual friends. At any other time, she would have run to Catherine for consolation, but she could not

cast a pall on her sister's happiness.

Papa had given his consent to Mr. Melchett's courtship, and Catherine was radiant with her joy. Even now, she was likely asleep in her bedroom, dreaming of her wedding and the future that awaited her. It was the future she dreamed of. For Lydia, the opposite was true. She had made a spectacle of herself in front of men who already thought women were lesser beings.

Lydia flung herself onto her bed and gave vent to her emotions. Catherine was on her way to the destiny she longed for; Lydia would never have that joy.

Charles Allen Seeks Accord

Papa would brook no refusal. "You shall take your place as a female member of the family," he told her. "You shall, along with your mother and sister, greet my guests as they arrive. There shall be no doubt that the Reed home is run according to the customary etiquette of our society and that I, as head of the household, do not countenance the sort of behavior which you exhibited last week. You have brought shame upon the family, Lydia, and I am deeply troubled by your unconscionable conduct. I do not know what you were thinking. I can only assume that you were taking part in some sort of prank which you regarded as harmless mischief. It was not harmless. A household is a smaller version of the government; there must be one authority and one code of law, and I am the arbiter of that code. A code which you have violated."

It was no use arguing with him. When the evening arrived, she was with her mother and sister, standing in greeting as the gentlemen arrived. The guests seemed to think that her escapade was a merry jest and teased her good-naturedly. When Charles arrived, looking somewhat uncertain as he came to Mrs. Reed to pay his respects, smiled a greeting to Lydia, she returned a frigid stare.

Charles showed uncertainty. "Miss Reed, I—"

"You had better take your place, Mr. Allen," she said in a glacial voice. "With the others."

"Yes, certainly, but I wanted to—"

"It would not do to keep them waiting on you, Mr. Allen. Good night," she said before turning her back on him to make her way up the staircase, her head high and her back straight as she summoned every inch of dignity that she could conjure forth.

"Mrs. Reed, I . . . I wonder if might be allowed an opportunity to beg your daughter's pardon? I had no idea that she was outside the

door and that my unexpected leave-taking would expose her to—to—I had no idea,” he finished lamely.

“It’s quite all right, Mr. Allen,” Mrs. Reed assured him. “The meetings go on rather late, sometimes, and we are generally retired by the time you gentlemen have finished. But now that the nights are longer, and the weather is not always salubrious for the ride back home, I think that we will wait up a bit later. I shall be in the sitting room, and you are quite welcome to bid us farewell before you depart.”

His face showed relief. “Thank you, Mrs. Reed,” he said eagerly. “I am grateful to you for your kindness.”

Mrs. Reed watched him disappear into the study, joining the gentlemen for the weekly meeting.

“After all,” Mrs. Reed said, “he’s quite a handsome young man, and your father reports that he is going to be taken on by Dr. Whitby, which betokens a respectable career. Lydia could do worse, and to say truly, my dear, I despair of her prospects.”

“Lydia is merely high-spirited, Mama,” Catherine defended her twin. “She meant no harm.”

“Gentlemen do not like a woman who engages in such antics,” Mrs. Reed answered. “To listen in on the conversation of men is bad enough, but to be caught at it! And in such a fashion. I fear that, if word has spread of the event, Lydia may have done profound harm to her marital prospects. Therefore, she must listen to Mr. Allen’s apologies, although what he has to apologize for, I cannot fathom. Still, men are seldom inclined to confess their shortcomings and his willingness to do so is another point in his favor.”

Lydia, however, did not see the matter in the same manner as her mother. When Charles Allen was announced and entered the drawing room, the first sight that caught his eye was of Lydia Reed standing by the fireplace and not seated with her mother and sister. She looked regal and forbidding, and, he thought, very, very beautiful.

“Miss Reed,” he said in a rush, going up to her, “I wish to apologize for last week. I did not mean . . . that is . . . I had no idea . . . that

you were outside the door,” he finished weakly.

Her features arranged in a forbidding countenance, Lydia continued her silence, offering nothing in the way of conversation.

“Lydia, dear, I believe that Mr. Allen . . .” Mrs. Reed, too, was stricken, as much by her daughter’s daunting expression as by the fact that she was not entirely sure why Mr. Allen sought to apologize. It was Lydia who ought to do so, it seemed, and yet there was no chance of that.

“I . . . suppose I should be leaving,” Charles said, looking hopefully at Lydia as if there was a chance that she would dissuade him.

There was not. Shoulders slumped in defeat, Charles bade his farewells and left.

“Really, Lydia,” Mrs. Reed remonstrated after he was gone, “you could have been just the least bit civil. It is hardly the young man’s fault that you were caught where you ought not to have been.”

“If you have nothing further, Mama, I should like to go to bed,” Lydia answered.

“Very well,” Mrs. Reed acknowledged defeat. “Good night. I hope that you will sleep well.”

Lydia didn’t answer and there was nothing more to say. Feeling as if she were mother to a changeling, Mrs. Reed said no more.

The next morning, when Lydia announced that she intended to walk into town and go to Mr. Obriot’s, Mrs. Reed swiftly gave permission, along with money to purchase a book. “Something nice,” she said, pressing the notes into her daughter’s hand. If only Lydia would choose a nice romantic novel where the heroine and the hero fell in love and married, Mrs. Reed thought. Perhaps that would help. Now, with Catherine on the threshold of marriage, and to such a dear young man, it seemed a pity for Lydia to be so intransigent. There had been hope with that Mr. Allen.

Lydia walked with her usual energetic stride. Catherine was not there to slow her down, and she could walk as quickly as she chose. But she missed Catherine, for all that she was slower. Catherine had chosen not to go into town because she had been invited to the

Melchett home for lunch; Edward's sisters-in-law would be there and they were eager to see her.

Mr. Obriot was speaking to a patron when Lydia entered the shop. He gave her a glance of welcome, his bright green eyes alight with pleasure as he saw her, before restoring his attention to his customer.

The door opened behind her. Lydia turned at the sound. Charles Allen was there, his expression both with anticipation and wary as he saw her.

"Miss Reed," he greeted.

"Mr. Allen," Lydia said in return, then looked away as she scanned one of the books Mr. Obriot had put out for display.

"Miss Reed, you must allow me to apologize for my part in your misadventure," he pleaded.

"Must I? I fail to see why. Please leave me alone, Mr. Allen; I feel that you have trespassed quite enough."

"Why are you so unwilling to even consider my apology?"

Mr. Obriot's customer paid for his purchase and left the shop. Mr. Obriot, keeping himself busy, did not come over to offer a greeting as he typically would have done. He turned away as if he were unaware that anyone else was in his shop, but Lydia had no doubt that he was keenly conscious of her presence. Mr. Obriot missed little in his powers of perception. Why did he not come and rescue her from the intrusive Mr. Allen?

"Miss Reed, will you not tell me why you are so---"

"You must be a blithering idiot!" Lydia exclaimed.

Taken aback, Charles stared at her in disbelief. "I should hope not," he said, insulted.

"Did it never occur to you that I was there for a reason? What to you is an evening of entertaining discourse is my university, my tutor, my matriculation! I am forbidden to take part in the scholarly pursuits which you can freely indulge in. I am expected to behave as if I have no ability to comprehend Mendel or Socrates or

Pythagoras, while you may dabble in as much or as little as you choose of their works. And for a few short weeks, I could sit, undetected, while I absorbed what the gentlemen discussed. Now, I am denied even that small pleasure.”

“I did not know,” he said slowly. “I had no idea.”

“Of course not. It did not occur to you that a female could possibly find such topics of interest. My father disapproves of my interest in science and mathematics; he feels that such matters are far beyond a woman’s mind. Let me pose this to you, Mr. Allen: inasmuch as it is women, and not men, who bear children, do you not think it highly probable that a woman would be likely to better understand the workings of her own anatomy?”

“I confess that I have never given the matter any thought,” Charles admitted, slightly discomfited by her candor.

“No, nor have others of your sex!” Lydia strode from the shop, closing the door behind her with noisy emphasis.

“She is a very spirited young lady,” Mr. Obriot commented.

“So I see.”

“Not many young ladies like her,” Mr. Obriot went on. “No airs or pretty, empty pleasantries with Miss Lydia Reed.”

“No.”

“She’s got a good head on her shoulders. A pity women aren’t allowed to show their intellect, don’t you think? I often wonder, when I am in a gathering or at a party, what the women are really thinking. We’ve put them in shadow, haven’t we? We say it’s where they belong, but what stormed out that door is proof that we are wrong.”

A Meeting of the Minds

“Mr. Allen, sir, begging your pardon for disturbing your lunch,” Howland said.

“He’s not disturbing us at all,” Dr. Reed said to the butler. “Howland, please show him in and have a plate set for him.”

But Charles demurred when the invitation to lunch was proffered. “Thank you, but I cannot stay. I merely stopped by to offer some of the volumes from my library to your daughter.”

Lydia, who had resolutely refused to greet him when he entered, was so astonished by his words that she seemed to have forgotten the forkful of food in her hand.

Charles grinned. “After our disagreement yesterday, I could not let a full day go by without making my apologies to you in a form that you could accept,” he said. “I think that you will find some of my medical books most interesting.”

“What is this?” Dr. Reed wanted to know. “Lydia, what have you been up to?”

“Nothing at all, Dr. Reed, the fault was entirely mine and I pray that you will allow me to make amends. I fear that I had been holding onto some antiquated notions which Miss Reed has corrected with,” here his smile spread across his face, “what I can only consider is her usual unique style. I must go now, but I shall bring more books when you have finished with these.”

He bowed to Dr. and Mrs. Reed and Catherine, and then was gone before anyone thought of a word to say.

“Lydia, have you been making a spectacle of yourself in public?”

Lydia was staring at the books that Charles had placed before her on the table. Textbooks. University textbooks. Oxford University

textbooks. He had brought them for her to read. He had said that she had corrected antiquated notions which he had held. He brought them to her so that she could read them. Clearly he believed her capable of understanding them. She reached out her hand to take one.

Her father reached across the table to place his hand over the books as if he were protecting them from the taint of a woman's contact.

"You shall not disobey me again, Lydia!" her father told her. "These are books meant for men to study. You have somehow bewitched young Charles into believing that you are capable of understanding their import. He is an agreeable young man but he is, as I said, a young man, one who cannot fathom the delicacy of a woman's mind. The weighty matters which the male mind can comprehend are entirely too demanding for females to contemplate. These books are forbidden to you. Do you understand me?"

Lydia looked up. "I understand you very well, Papa," she answered.

Catherine, who had been silent throughout the exchange, felt as if her heart would break. Did they not understand that in denying Lydia access to what she craved, they were shutting off a source of her vitality?

Lydia left the dining room, not first asking for permission. Catherine managed to maintain her composure, but as soon as she was finished, she excused herself and went directly to her sister's bedroom.

Lydia was at her window seat, staring out upon the view and looking as if she were a hostage inside her room.

"Papa is wrong," Lydia said.

"I know."

"Charles has understood what Papa will not."

"Yes, I know."

"I want to read those books."

"And so you shall."

“How? He will keep them from me.”

Catherine patted her sister's hand. “He will put them on the shelf in his study behind his desk, where he always puts items that no one is to view. He has always done so. And whenever he is away, you will go into his study and remove the books, one at a time, and read them. And you shall communicate with Mr. Allen, to ask questions about what you have read. As he has shown himself willing to share them with you, he will welcome your queries.”

Lydia considered her sister. Obedient, pliable, dutiful Catherine was proposing rebellion. She leaned forward and gave her sister a fierce hug. “Catherine!” she exclaimed. “You are the best sister ever!”

“And I always shall be,” Catherine replied. “As you are to me.”

Catherine's prediction was accurate. Lydia soon had access to the books that Charles had left for her and it became her great delight to pore over them, particularly the medical books, as she was introduced to a world of science that was both broader and deeper than anything she had previously studied. There were, however, matters which she did not understand, though she was reluctant to admit ignorance.

“I am sure that Mr. Allen did not immediately understand all that he was learning until he was able to inquire of his instructors,” Catherine pointed out. “Why do you not ask him?”

Lydia did not respond right away. The girls were in Catherine's bedroom; Catherine was packing to stay with the Melchetts for a week and Lydia was helping her. Secretly, she was dreading her sister's absence. They were always together and to be parted, even for a short time and a short distance, reminded her that with marriage on the horizon, Catherine was laying the foundation for her own life, one which would not always include her twin.

“Lydia,” Catherine said gently, “you should not assume that, because Mr. Allen has been generous with his books, he expects you to know the matter already. You are far too demanding of yourself, much more so than Mr. Allen would be.”

“You do not know that.”

“You may be blind to some things, but I am not.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Lydia asked in bewilderment.

But Catherine merely smiled and would not say.

That night, alone in her bedroom, Lydia sat with her quill poised over a letter. She did not want to admit what she did not know. She did not want to admit that the prospect of corresponding with Charles Allen was not entirely disagreeable. She did not want to succumb to the weaker feelings of her gender. Such thoughts did not suit a woman of resolve who intended, somehow, to learn as much as a man. But where else could she go in her search for information? There were no tutors willing to supply a female with knowledge on subjects deemed unsuitable. Mr. Obriot would have been willing to help but he was a bookseller, not a physician. Papa was knowledgeable in a great many things, but he had not a medical background and even if he did have, he would not have encouraged her quest. He had already proven that.

Lydia bit her lip. There was no other choice.

Dear Mr. Allen, she began.

Lydia did not know that, when Charles received her letter, he tore it open eagerly to read the contents, and foregoing his supper or anything else he had intended to do that evening, he sat down at his desk to pen his reply.

My dear Miss Reed,

May I say how delighted I am to hear from you? The opportunity to share your exploration of the field of medicine enriches me because it allows me to remember the anticipation with which I entered my studies. I hope that you are also feeling that “

sense of adventure which accompanies such a quest.

I admit that it did not occur to me that medicine, science, philosophy and other disciplines of the mine were not the exclusive province of men. But I have realized, since our encounter, that I have been exceedingly short-sighted. Was not Deborah a judge in the Old Testament? As far back as ancient Greece, the name of Aspasia is matched to that of Pericles, both being equal in their brilliance of thought. We have such examples before us, and yet I have been oblivious to their meaning. In our own land, did not the islands of Britain and Ireland give birth to

such fearsome women as Grace O'Malley, the pirate and Boadicea, who did not fear to challenge the Romans?

In short, Miss Reed, I humbly and contritely beg your pardon for my arrogance. I hope that you will forgive me so that, together, we may embark upon this voyage of discovery. I shall be delighted to answer the questions that you have posed, and I welcome more.

Lydia hugged the letter to her bosom. His words were sincere, she could not doubt him. He had provided the evidence of that in his examples and it was plainly clear that he did not think less of her for her wish to learn. But it must be no more than this, a meeting of the minds. She could not weaken, as other women did, and seek his heart. His mind alone must be her destination.

Welcoming the New Doctor

The cold winter passed with a source of unexpected warmth as the correspondence between Lydia and Charles Allen commenced. He had moved to the village to begin his work with Dr. Whitby shortly after Christmas, and the doctor, invigorated at the prospect of having an assistant who would help him in his practice, hosted a party in early January to introduce Dr. Allen to his prospective patients.

The Reeds were among the guests. As she dressed, Lydia felt a trifle shy, although there was certainly no reason, she told herself, for such missish vapors. Mr.—Dr. Allen—was a correspondent, not a beau and it would be of no significance to him whether she dressed in her red velvet gown or not. Still, it was a social occasion and the dress was new; this was the perfect occasion to wear it.

“How strange it seems, does it not, to be dressed unlike,” noted Catherine, who wore a green and white striped satin dress with an abundance of lace at the bodice.

“We shall forever be in Mrs. Melchett’s debt for her words to Mama,” Lydia replied. “You shall have a most obliging mama-in-law.”

“She’s very strong-minded,” Catherine said hesitantly. “Very kind, of course, but I do wonder if perhaps . . .”

“Shall you live there, or here?”

“I have spoken to Edward of the matter and he is in accord with me. We shall live here, with Papa and Mama, until such time as we can afford to live on our own.” Catherine squeezed her sister’s hand. “I could not bear to be far from you, Lydia, and this way, even marriage shall not separate us.”

“I am glad of that.”

"Of course, you may find yourself married, you know," Catherine teased as the door to Dr. Whitby's house opened, and they walked, side by side, into the spacious room which, in less festive times, served as a waiting room for those patients who came to him rather than he going to them.

"I do not know what you mean—oh, Mr. Allen. Or rather, Dr. Allen," Lydia greeted the young man who had come over to her as soon as he saw her. "This is your official welcome to Castlemaine."

Charles' blue eyes were bright. "I feel as if I have long since been welcomed to the village, Miss Reed," he told her.

Lydia felt her cheeks grow pink. "It is true that we are in need of a second doctor," she said. "I fear that with winter upon us, we shall plague you with all manner of rheums and aches."

"I suspect, Miss Reed, that you would be as able as I to diagnose and treat such conditions. Where is your sister going?"

"I---she—I don't know, she was here but a moment ago. I—perhaps she has gone for punch."

"Shall I fetch a glass for you?"

"No, no, I am fine as I am," Lydia answered distractedly. "But surely you must attend to your guests."

"They are not my guests, Miss Reed," he replied with dancing eyes. "They are Dr. Whitby's guests."

He looked very handsome, even in his sober black suit and simple cravat. His chestnut hair caught the glow from the candlelight which abounded in the room, giving it a rich shine as if sunlight had somehow been captured within the locks. He seemed taller, too, but of course that was absurd, she thought. He was the same height that he had been before.

"Perhaps I will have a glass of punch," she said.

"I shall fetch it for you. Do not run away," he directed.

Run away? Where would she run, and why? Her father had engaged Dr. Whitby in conversation; her mother, Mrs. Melchett, and Catherine were clustered together, no doubt furthering the wedding

plans. The assembly of people seemed to be enjoying themselves; she saw several people speak to Dr. Allen as he attempted to make his way back to her with glasses of punch in his hands.

“Ah,” he said, handing a glass to her, “I had to run the gauntlet.”

“I shall prize it all the more,” she answered pertly, taking a sip, “for the effort you went to bring it.”

“I hope that you will always feel so. Miss Reed, I wonder if we might—“

“Oh, look, that is the Widow Murdoch. She was very ill last winter, and I think that she will be one of your first patients. She is a very tart-tongued old woman, and will not easily be persuaded that any of your new-fangled methods will suit her. But you must greet her and put her at ease.”

“I—yes, if you feel that I should do so,” he said, not looking as if he were pleased at the charge.

Lydia took another sip of her punch. “Oh, yes,” she told him. “I do think so.”

It continued thus throughout the night. As Charles gamely followed her instructions, every time he managed to find her alone, to meet this future patient or to speak to this convalescent, Lydia found herself feeling more secure with the distance that parted them. And yet when the evening ended and she was home and back in her room again, she did not know why she felt bereft, as if she had lost something that she had not known she possessed.

It was better so, she decided as she doused the candle flame and got into bed. She must learn to have a heart of steel and it would not do to be seen as one of the village maidens’ intent upon inveigling the handsome young doctor into a romance. Far better to continue their relationship through letters which were entirely about her studies of his books, and not from a silly personal attraction, for of course, she was not attracted in the least. He was handsome, it was true, and charming, in the way of a man who is exactly what he seems to be and not one dependent upon false airs. He was willing to admit that he had erred, and that was not true of all men.

It would make him a better doctor that was all. It was nothing more

than that. Perhaps he would be too busy, with the practice, to continue his correspondence. Or perhaps it would seem foolish to write when they lived in the same village.

Lydia felt her heart pang. She could not bear the thought of doing without his letters. If Mrs. Reed had guessed why Lydia was always prompt when the post arrived, she gave no indication of any suspicion. Papa never bothered with the post until it was delivered to his desk by Howland, so he was not curious. Catherine said nothing in front of their parents, but when she and Lydia were by themselves, she asked what news there was from Dr. Allen.

For it was the truth that Charles Allen did not only speak of the questions that Lydia asked. He wrote of many things: the books he was reading, an article he had enjoyed in the newspaper, a conversation he had overheard in the inn as he partook of a late supper one night after he had spent hours at the bedside of an ailing farmer.

Although Lydia made certain that her letters were entirely given over to the medical questions she had after reading his textbooks, she relished the parts of his missives which were almost conversational, as if he were sitting at her side. He spoke of what he was learning from Dr. Whitby and through his words, Lydia saw him as a student, studying from a master so that he would, in time, master the medical arts as his mentor had. If only the world were different, she thought as she folded his letter and placed it inside one of her books. If only she could join him as a student, learning as he learned, with the goal of sharing a beloved profession. For that was all that there was between the two of them, she told herself. They each had a reverence for the science of healing. It was no more than that.

Separation, Rumors and Subterfuge

“What has become of Dr. Allen?” Catherine asked at breakfast the next morning. “I did not see him in church.”

“Whitby has sent him off to a conference in London,” Papa answered. “He believes the boy has great promise and he wants him to learn the latest practices in medicine.”

Catherine gave her sister a meaningful look over the rim of her cup of coffee. Lydia had known that he was going away but had said nothing of it. There was no reason to share the information, which would only give the erroneous impression that her letters to Charles were of a personal nature. She hoped that Catherine would not press her; it seemed that, with her wedding coming closer, Catherine could think of nothing but romance, not only for herself, but for Lydia, in circumstances which were not in the least romantic.

Her hope that Catherine would not press her on the subject was futile.

“Ah, there you are, I have been looking for you,” Catherine said later that afternoon.

Lydia was in the morning room, reading one of Charles’ books on anatomy. Mama had gone to make calls and Papa had business in the village, which afforded Lydia the opportunity to enjoy her reading material without the usual furtive camouflage.

“Lydia,” Catherine said earnestly, sitting down beside her sister. “It seems to me that Dr. Allen’s interest in you is not confined to the textbooks that he has provided for you to read.”

“You are mistaken,” Lydia protested.

"You are blushing," her sister returned.

"I am feeling a bit warm. I think spring has come early, do you not agree? I hope that the blossoms will not suffer if we have an untimely frost."

"Do not change the subject. Why can you not admit that you are not averse to Dr. Allen?"

"I am not in the least averse to him. He has been most generous with his library and I have expressed my gratitude to him for it."

"It would take but a little indication on your part and I am sure that Dr. Allen would openly confess his intentions. You know that Papa and Mama would be delighted to welcome him into the family as your husband, and only think of how happy you would be to marry someone who thinks as you do, and would welcome your opinions on matters of importance to him."

"I think that you are quite dizzy with your own wedding and therefore you cannot resist making everyone else dance," Lydia replied. "Dear Catherine, I assure you that Dr. Allen is not looking for a wife. Or that, if he is, he has not looked upon me for that role."

"Would it not trouble you," Catherine began gently, "if Dr. Allen did find someone to marry who was responsive to his proposal?"

One look at her sister's stricken face gave Catherine her answer. "You must let him know how you feel, Lydia," Catherine urged. "You cannot risk losing him."

"I cannot lose him because I do not claim him," Lydia said. "Catherine, you are becoming most tiresome on this matter. Dr. Allen and I are not contemplating any more than the sharing of books, I assure you."

"And I assure you that if you do not give him notice of your feelings, he will feel obliged to seek a wife elsewhere. He will marry, it is the natural way of men and women. If you will not welcome him as a suitor, he will marry out of duty. He is in London; do you not consider that there are young ladies in London who will be setting their caps for him? I pray you, Lydia, do not relinquish this opportunity for joy."

“You are quite fanciful, Catherine,” Lydia said, turning the page of the book before her. “I had hoped to finish this book while Mama and Papa are away so that I may return it to Dr. Allen upon his return to the village, but you are causing a delay.”

Catherine rose. “So you know when he will return,” she said, pouncing upon the information.

“He mentioned it in passing, no doubt because he does not want me to forget to return his books to him.”

“You are blushing, Lydia dear. Perhaps you should ask Dr. Allen for a remedy for this strangely warmer spring which you are experiencing.”

Catherine left the room with a smile on her face, ignoring her sister’s vexed expression.

But after Catherine left, Lydia found herself unable to concentrate on the pages before her. Charles, marrying someone else? How would she endure to see him with another woman? Perhaps he would prefer to marry a woman who did not aspire to share his profession? Perhaps, even now, he was sitting in a drawing room in a fine London home, enjoying tea and the company of a pretty girl who did not know a femur from a hair follicle, flirting with her under the indulgent chaperonage of her mother, who would no doubt welcome such a match. Perhaps he had met the daughter of a London physician and he would become engaged to her, and after he had spent enough time in Castlemaine studying under Dr. Whitby, he would move to London where he could become a physician to the fashionable set. Perhaps—

Lydia gripped the book in her hands. She must stop this. She had set her path in motion and she would not be dissuaded by the vanity of her sex. If Charles sought the company of another, who was she to stop him, and why should she do so? He was free to marry whomever he chose.

Catherine did not agree. She had approached her sister regarding Dr. Allen’s affections with deliberate intent. She had learned from village talk that a young lady in London, a Miss Hill, had been seen in the doctor’s company on more than one occasion, accompanying her to the theatre and the opera with her parents. Apparently Dr.

Hill had a very illustrious practice that included members of Parliament and a duchess. The man who married into that family would have his fortune made for him.

Probing the matter would require something akin to surgery, Catherine reckoned as she sat down at her escritoire and prepared to write a letter. It was not easy for her to be invasive of the privacy of another, particularly someone to whom she was only peripherally acquainted. But Lydia's happiness was at stake and Catherine would not be idle on her sister's behalf.

Dear Dr. Allen,

I hope that you will not suppose me forward for writing to you in this fashion, but I believe that I have cause to do so. I am under the impression that you do not regard my sister Lydia with a lack of favor, and I am---

Catherine paused. Did she dare declare Lydia's feelings when Lydia had disavowed them?

Yes, she dared.

Resolutely Catherine dipped her quill pen in ink

sure that she shares your feelings, although she is too proud to confess it. I hope that, if you bear tender feelings for my sister, you will announce them, and I am confident that she will reciprocate. I beg you to forgive my boldness in writing to you in such a manner. Lydia and I are twins, you know, and we share a bond of such affection that I treasure her happiness as greatly as I do my own.

Your obedient servant,

Catherine Reed

Finishing her letter, she hastened to post it before she could reconsider and change her mind.

"Do you think I have done something terrible?" she asked Edward later that afternoon. Edward was invited to dine with the Reeds and he had accepted with an alacrity which betrayed itself by his early arrival. Smiling, Mrs. Reed suggested that they take a turn in the

garden while she was there to pick the early blooms for the table.

Edward smiled. "I think you are a queen among sisters," he answered. "If you think that your sister and Dr. Allen ought to be together, then nothing should dissuade you from that path."

"I do think it. Lydia will not confess her feelings and how can Dr. Allen possibly pursue his interest, of which I have not the slightest doubt, if he receives no encouragement?"

"He cannot. It's a great challenge, you know, to confess to a woman that you find her attractive and that you wish to spend the rest of your life in her company."

"Was it so for you?" Catherine inquired, smiling at him. Their relationship was on such sure footing that each of them, both by nature introverted and tentative, had gained in confidence and poise during their courtship. So it was that Catherine had been able to address a letter to Dr. Allen because she knew, deep in her heart, that he was exactly the sort of man who should marry Lydia. If only Lydia would recognize this.

Charles Declares His Intentions

"Dr. Allen, I did not expect you to respond in person to my letter," Catherine said, a week later when Howland came to her as she sat at the piano to tell her that Dr. Allen had come to call upon her.

As it would not have been proper for her to meet with him alone, she had immediately followed Howland to the entrance room where Dr. Allen waited, pacing.

"I could do no less," he declared, handing over his hat and coat to Howland. "I love Lydia with all my heart, but she refuses, no matter how broadly I hint in my letters, to respond to anything that has ought to do with private matters. I own that I am heartily sick of letters about the proposed inoculations for diseases when it is my heart that has been stricken."

Catherine laughed. "Lydia is convinced that if she succumbs to a woman's tender emotions, she will diminish her determination to prove that women are equal to men in their mental faculties."

"She does not need to prove it to me! Have I not proven that I hold her in the highest regard, not only because of her womanhood but because of her brilliance and her wit?"

"Howland," Catherine said to the butler who was standing by, his expression impassive as if he heard nothing of what was being discussed. "Please go to my sister and alert her that I wish to speak with her on a matter of the utmost importance."

"Certainly, Miss Reed."

Lydia was puzzled by Howland's message and by his lack of explanation. When she pressed him for details, he only repeated that her sister wished to see her on a matter of the utmost importance. Hurriedly, fearful that something was wrong, Lydia left her bedroom and raced down the staircase with disregard for decorum.

When she spied Charles standing in the foyer with Catherine at his side, her pace slowed. She was torn between excitement at seeing Charles after a long absence and annoyance with Catherine for misleading her.

Catherine smiled as if she knew her sister's thoughts. "Lydia, dear, we have a guest, as you can see."

"Hello, Dr. Allen, I trust that you had a productive time in London."

"Yes, Miss Reed, but I—"

Catherine interrupted him. "Dr. Allen is here on a medical matter, Lydia. He seeks your opinion on his condition."

Both Charles and Lydia stared at her.

"You see," Catherine went on, speaking swiftly lest she lose courage, "Dr. Allen has found himself infected with a condition which can only be cured in one fashion. It is sometimes thought that a gentleman so afflicted may readily seek healing with any sort of cure, but in truth . . . in truth, there is only one that is guaranteed to answer. Is that not so, Dr. Allen?"

"Yes, yes, it is so," Charles agreed, gazing eagerly upon Lydia's lovely countenance as he realized the intent of Catherine Reed's peculiar message. "Only one, that is, there can only be one cure. A man is often mistaken in thinking that another er—form of treatment will suffice, but in that case, the, the condition worsens and then it cannot be healed at all. It is too late."

Lydia frowned. "Neither of you is making any sense," she observed.

"Miss Reed . . . Lydia . . . I am speaking of my heart," Charles said, coming closer to her as she stood on the bottom stair. "I wish to marry you. I know that you fear marriage as a fetter on a woman, but I give you my word of honor that I will not shackle you. I will honor you as my equal and I will, all the length of my days, cherish you as much for your brain as for your beauty. Will you consent to cure me, as no other woman can do?"

Lydia studied him with a severe expression. "You look quite healthy to me," she said.

"The heart is unseen," he replied.

She took his wrist. "Your pulse seems steady."

"I am in the presence of my healer," he answered.

"I see no signs of illness."

The two were intent upon their dialogue, a conversation which, although light, was serious in purpose. Neither noticed that Catherine had stolen away to her father's study. It was improper to leave them unchaperoned, but Catherine decided that it was better to act quickly before Lydia's unpredictable nature ruined the proceedings.

"Perhaps you failed to diagnose my condition."

A very faint smile flickered upon Lydia's lips. "You are questioning my ability," she

told him.

"Even the most excellent doctor has been known to misdiagnose. But when he . . . or she, reviews the symptoms, a more accurate diagnosis can be offered."

"What do you think is the cure for your malady?"

Charles moved a step closer. "Your hand in marriage," he answered, taking her hand in his.

Dr. Reed was nonplussed when he emerged from his study at Catherine's insistence to see his daughter and Dr. Allen embracing. Their arms were wrapped around one another, their lips were joined, and it was plainly apparent that neither was aware that anyone else was in the room.

"Your mother will be most troubled by this," Dr. Reed said in a low voice. "She is—ah, there she comes."

But Mrs. Reed, when she spied the couple clinging to one another as if they could not be separated, smiled with pleasure.

"Dr. Allen," she cooed. "When you have finished kissing my daughter, perhaps you will be so good as to meet with her father in the study so that the two of you may formalize this matter to everyone's satisfaction. Dr. Allen? Dr. Allen?"

She crossed the room and joined her husband and daughter. "Do you think he is hard of hearing?" she whispered.

"I think his hearing is only impaired by his ardor," Catherine said happily.

"I do not know . . . I suppose that, under the circumstances, I have no choice but to accept his offer," Dr. Reed said.

Mrs. Reed smiled. "A short engagement, I think, husband?"

"Yes . . . very short. I must say—do they not need air? I'm quite sure one of them is likely to suffocate if they continue thus."

"No matter," Catherine assured her parents. "He is a doctor and will know how to revive her, and Lydia has done a considerable amount of reading on medical matters and will be able to assist him most ably."

Dr. Reed sighed. "I hope he knows what he is doing," he said. "It's not at all suitable for a woman to be learned in such things."

"It does not appear to have done her any harm, husband, judging from what we are seeing."

"I suppose not . . . I suppose not. Do you think . . . "

His wife took his arm. "All is well, my dear. You must not fret so. Women understand these matters much better than men."

"I rely on your judgment, wife," Dr. Reed said.

Mrs. Reed clasped her arm in his. "You do me such credit, my dear. I am the luckiest of women." She turned to Catherine and, to Catherine's surprise, winked. "What would we frail women do without the discernment of our menfolk?" she asked.

"I cannot imagine, Mama. I simply cannot imagine."

The Ladies Companion Meets the Jekyll & Hyde Baron

Clean Regency Romance

Companion

Elayne Stanton, at age twenty, searched for employment. When she told her father she was hired as Companion to Lady Sibyl Tawnish, he looked at her with a hint of despair in his eyes. That one look of compassion was fleeting. Elayne and Edward Stanton became enemies while she nursed her mentally ill mother until her death a few weeks ago. Even after her passing, Edward denied his wife suffered from the illness that caused her to fly into a rage one moment and in the next switch to the woman he loved as if they were young again.

“Now you want to leave me, do you, Elayne? What would your mother say?”

Elayne knew her mother would approve her accomplishment of securing a position at Ayrshire Park. At least, she would approve if she had been in her right mind. Elayne hoped Lady Sibyl’s condition was physical lack and not a mental illness.

“Father, you and I would not get along any better if I stayed here with you. Lydia has offered to come and live here. She would cook for you and with Kate’s help all of you would get along fine.”

Edward knew his daughter was right but he did not want his spinster sister to move into his house. She was obsessed with perfection that included not only people, but the food, the cleanliness of rooms and even dictate to the large Persian cat he loved more than Lydia or his daughter. The thoughts of having Lydia move in and run his life was abhorrent to him.

“I will get along fine without Lydia or you.” He waved his hand in dismissal. “Go on and be on your way.” He didn’t bother to ask when she would be leaving.

Elayne was packed and her transportation arranged by Baron Cedric Tawnish was secured. She had one more night in the home she had

always known. She would not look back. There were few happy memories to take with her. She went to bed that night thinking how wonderful it would be to live in a fine house. She could not picture it but her imagination was quite lively on the matter.

The next day, Elayne gaped at the long drive to the unseen front of the Manor. She could see several spires in the distance in between the hills. It took a few seconds for her to realize the road they were now on was meant for those who had the purpose of living at or visiting Ayrshire Park, and none other. She took a deep breath and drew in the irresistible scent of smoked wood coming from one of the numerous outbuildings. The sunset called attention to snow-laden trees. She pulled her wool cloak tighter around her until the coach came to a halt in front of the Manor. She peered upward, unable to see the top of the mansion.

Anticipation mixed with awe filled her as she stepped down. She was greeted by a formal servant who bowed slightly and summoned the thin boy behind him to assist with Elayne's bags. The staircases on either side framed a large foyer that seemed endless.

"Baron Cedric Tawnish wishes to meet with you right away."

She followed down another passageway until ushered into a dark Study. Massive bookcases on one side reached the ceiling. On the other side a tall handsome man waited. He welcomed her to his Estates and invited her to sit in the oversized leather chair across from him. A slight woman poured hot tea and left the room. Elayne felt the dark eyes on her as if assessing his choice of hire.

"I hope you have had a pleasant journey," he said. She told him she had. "As you know, I have hired you to care of my wife. She has a nurse who comes daily but I fear she is lonely and your companionship will entertain her and comfort her. I understand you cared for your own mother."

"I cared for her until her death a month ago."

The Baron nodded with approval. "Lady Sibyl became ill a year ago and is much too frail. Her health has never been good but she is deteriorating more than I wish for her. She is particular about her own diet. The Cook knows her wishes and you will dine with her at breakfast and at noon every day. Lady Sibyl prefers her companion

eat what she eats. I believe you will find it delectable enough to suit your palate.”

The Baron’s face had not changed expression. He gave instructions in the way that he expected no objections. He continued.

“In the evening, you will dine with me and anyone else who may be there for dinner. You will be expected to give me a report on my wife’s day each evening after the meal is finished. If there are guests, you will give your report in my Study in private before I join the guests in the Drawing Room. At that time, you will return to your own quarters for the night.”

When asked, Elayne told him she had no questions. He then told her the Cook had a late supper waiting for her in the Servants’ dining area. The formal man she presumed was the Butler took her to the kitchen where she met Mable Buckler, Cook and Head of Housekeeping. Mable was a robust woman and for her weight she moved effortlessly. The thin boy stirred embers in the large fireplace. Mable set the plate of steaming mutton and potatoes in front of her without a word. The boy eyed her while she ate. A scalding mug of hot liquid was set before her. Finally, Mable spoke.

“When you are finished I will show you to your quarters. You will be expected to rise at six sharp. Annie will make sure you are up every morning and then tomorrow you will meet Lady Sibyl.”

Elayne thanked her. She decided Mable was no one to ask about Lady Sibyl’s temperament. In fact, she made up her mind that there was much she would have to learn on her own in the household. She glanced at the boy. Mable followed her eyes.

“That is Wilford. It is his job to keep the fires stoked when used. He does other things when he isn’t lazy.”

No teasing was displayed in Mable’s eyes. The boy seemed to shrink but his eyes held a fire that told Elayne he could hold his own. He sprang up and shuffled the coals once more. Then he reached behind the worn chair near the hearth and pulled a shabby thick blanket out. He spread it on the stone floor and after bunching it to his satisfaction, lay down on it for the night.

They climbed the stairs to the third floor and Mable pointed out

Lady Sibyl's quarters. "Annie Pringle sits with her all night until you arrive at six-thirty. After tomorrow you will not be awakened by Annie. You will be expected to be up and ready to relieve her of her duties."

Elayne's room was down a short passageway that joined Lady Sibyl's bedroom. It was simply furnished with a small table and chair, a bureau and a bed that had a short stool to assist in climbing into it. The same dark mahogany facings on windows and the door matched the wood she had seen throughout the home so far. Heavy draperies closed tightly over two large windows that measured from the floor to a foot from the ceiling. Two large candlesticks were lit on top of the small mantle over a recessed fireplace. Mable picked up one and placed it on the table beside the bed.

"We keep candles burning only as long as necessary. The Baron does not believe in wasting anything." With that comment, the large woman left the room and closed the ornate door behind her.

Elayne looked around at her surroundings. The room was much better than her small room at home. She snuffed out the candle on the mantle. Once undressed, she did the same with the second one. She willed her heart to stop beating so fast thinking of what the next day would bring. Finally, fatigue from the journey and newness of her environment took over and she slept until she heard the knock on her door.

"Good morning," said a voice. It was light and the first cheerful voice she'd heard since arriving the night before. "I'm Annie Pringle and I'm sure Mable told you this was the only morning I would be here to awaken you." She laughed. "Don't worry. If you are not by Lady Sibyl's beside at six-thirty sharp, I will awaken you."

Annie turned to pull the thin boy inside the room. Wilford dumped coals in the hearth. He pushed a few aside and lit a small handful, enough to slightly warm the chilled room.

"This will take the chill off for you until you are dressed and ready. Just come down that passageway and I will introduce you to Lady Sibyl."

Wilford stirred the embers and left without a word. Elayne proceeded to get ready for her first day as Companion to Lady Sibyl

Tawnish.

Once introduced, Elayne squirmed at the scrutiny her Mistress poured over her. So far she had not said a word. Annie proceeded to show her where everything that Lady Sibyl needed was placed. Then she said, "I will go downstairs and get your breakfasts."

After she left, Elayne turned to Lady Sibyl. "Is there anything I can get you while we wait for your breakfast?"

"There is nothing," said Sibyl. "Where did Cedric find you?"

At first, Elayne was taken aback but then realized she liked the way Lady Sibyl could get right to the point. "I came from Kilmarnock."

"I presume you have no family or you wouldn't have come here to get employment," said Sibyl.

"My mother died a short time ago. My father is still there and I have no siblings."

So far Lady Sibyl had not smiled. "I wonder you left him by himself." Elayne explained her father was still healthy and capable to be on his own. "Still," said Sibyl, "I find it rather selfish of you to leave him like that."

Elayne had no intentions of explaining the estrangement between herself and her father. Instead, she told Sibyl that his sister Lydia offered to come and live with him and, if needed, she would come. Finally, it seemed Lady Sibyl had had enough of Elayne's background. To Elayne's relief, Annie came in with a large tray. She set things up for Lady Sibyl and assisted her to sit up in bed. She spread a wide tatted coverlet over her and set the tray in front of her. Elayne realized the woman needed no assistance with eating.

"This one is yours, Elayne." Annie set her breakfast on a table a few feet from Sibyl's.

Elayne knew it would not take long to consume the meal. It consisted of a poached egg with no seasonings. Next to it was a thin biscuit with a splotch of unfamiliar jam on it. The dainty cup held steaming plain black tea. There were no sugar cubes to add. She glanced at Sibyl's placing. Hers was identical. Elayne wondered how she would last until mid-morning tea time. Perhaps there would be

something more substantial then.

Annie gave her more instructions as if Lady Sibyl was not there. She pointed out books that were favorites of the Lady and told Elayne most of the morning would be spent reading to her. "The nurse will be in and out. She will take care of any needs Lady Sibyl may have." The necessary needs were not mentioned, nor necessary.

It looked as if Elayne's main duties were to read to Lady Sibyl, discuss any topic of Sibyl's choice and on occasion the nurse would assist her into a large chair that was in the sitting room next to the bedroom. There she and Elayne, sitting with her, could watch anything going on in back of the Manor. If desired, she would sit in a like room across the hallway where they viewed the comings and goings of anyone to and from the front drive.

After a few days, Elayne realized how much real interest Lady Sibyl took in the activities of everyone. She seemed to know each servant though often not by name. She could point out the next move and exact mannerisms as they crossed the expansive back yard. Most huddled in thin coats as they ran from one task to the next.

"Those two are in love," said Sibyl. She pointed a thin finger to a young woman in a thin coat. The woman took what appeared to be scraps of food left from a meal. She walked toward a large structure that housed chickens and ducks on one end and cows on the other end, according to Lady Sibyl. "Watch what happens." Again, she pointed, this time to her left. "See that young man. He waits until it is time for her to come out. They go into the barn where no one can see them." She leaned back and shook her head slightly in frustration. "I have pointed this out to Cedric more than once. He insists he will not interfere since he states if they are doing their tasks and on time, he will allow short intervals such as that."

Elayne knew the two had no time to get into anything unseemly in Lady Sibyl's eyes in so short a timeframe. They probably had time to peck one another on the cheeks at most. She agreed with the Baron.

One afternoon as they observed a carriage coming up the long drive, Lady Sibyl began to cough. Elayne handed her a glass of water. She pushed it away and continued coughing. Elayne hurried

to get the nurse who sat in the small alcove at the doorway. The nurse almost collided with Elayne. She quickly helped Lady Sibyl sit up straighter and then offered the glass of water. The coughing subsided and Sibyl ordered her to put her back in her bed.

"I wish to sleep a while," she said. This was Elayne's dismissal signal. She went to the far corner of the large room and sat with an open book. She peered closely at the print. The room darkened with closed drapes at Sibyl's request, and she didn't dare light a candle.

Each evening Elayne gave a report to Baron Cedric in his Study. His dark handsome looks contrasted starkly to his wife's pale, ashen appearance. He was muscular and fit. It was difficult for Elayne to lower her eyes from his nearly navy blue ones. Coal black hair added to his irresistible good looks. A few weeks passed and the routine of their nightly meeting became more familiar. The Baron sometimes let his guard down and talked as if they were good friends rather than employee and employer. Elayne looked forward to the meetings. They now lasted longer than the initial five to ten minute ones. She felt he asked more questions to detain her longer. As time went on, he asked less about his wife and more about Elayne's life.

For Elayne, the encounters made her tedious days with Lady Sibyl more bearable and she looked forward to them. She was highly disappointed when the Baron was away from Ayrshire Park.

The Decision

Elayne paid more attention to Lady Sibyl's observations. The large window on back of her quarters looked out onto the outbuildings, and the stables in the distance. Elayne became enamored with the way Baron Cedric rode one of his fine horses every afternoon.

"The Baron is an excellent horseman," said Lady Sibyl. She obviously admired her husband. "That is one reason the Regent Prince George summons him to his court often. He recognizes his ability to lead. The Baron has always been a leader. He can be very persuasive." She smiled at first. "It did not take much on his part to persuade me to marry him." She looked closely at her Companion. "He can waver sometimes. Many have been dismissed from our services here because they tried to lure him away from all that is proper."

The comment was not lost on Elayne. She had already experienced the magnetism of Baron Cedric Tawnish. She had the feeling it was Lady Sibyl who made sure certain female servants were fired from Ayrshire Park and not so much her husband's desire. Elayne vowed to stay above temptations when it came to the Lord of the Estate. Still, she often had him on her mind. He was extremely kind to her with words and in his treatment of her. She thought how lucky Lady Sibyl was to nab someone like that. Usually, men who owned such vast wealth were not always so solicitous of those under him. On other estates, cruelty sometimes increased when Lords dealt with others.

Baron Tawnish was consistently respectful toward anyone under his command. The exception was if someone did not measure up to his expectations. Then he could be harsh and unrelenting. Tenants and servants like that were never allowed to continue working at Ayrshire Park. Elayne had only seen his good side but rumors made their way through the estate. The Baron apparently was happy with her services to his wife. He visited Lady Sibyl every morning after

breakfast unless away from the grounds.

Elayne and Annie became good friends. Annie kept her abreast of the goings-on downstairs during the day. She spoke of her own upbringing and that of her brother.

“Our parents left us alone when I was but eight years old. Wilford was three. My aunt took us in but they had a large family of their own. We weren’t treated well by my cousins.” She told Elayne how her uncle told her and Wilford they would have to go out on their own. She was fifteen and her brother ten years old.

“Where did you go?” asked Elayne.

“On the streets where we begged for food.” Her words were said in a matter of fact tone but Elayne saw sadness along with desperation in her eyes. “One day a woman told us she was taking us to a home for children like us. She looked at me and said I may be too old for the lodging place.” Annie’s tone became defiant. “I told her if I couldn’t live there, neither would my brother. When we arrived, the man and woman in charge said I could stay until they decided about me. The woman who brought us there felt some sympathy, I suppose.”

According to Annie, the first woman brought them to Ayrshire Park. She knew Mable very well and through her intervention, she procured a position for Annie. Wilford was given the responsibility of maintaining fires in the hearths. From what Elayne observed, the thin boy carried his weight in his responsibilities but he was known to hide out when he was tired of the wearisome and never-ending orders.

“I have to keep reminding him to do whatever they ask. We get regular food and a place to sleep.”

Elayne envisioned Wilford’s bed on the stone floor in the kitchen. She asked Annie where she slept.

“I sleep in the big chair in Lady Sibyl’s room but very lightly. I must be awake when she calls for me. Usually she sleeps through the whole night. The second nurse looks in on her several times but I know she sleeps sometimes, too.”

As the days went by, Lady Sibyl became more and more irritable.

She complained when Cedric did not come daily to see her. Elayne knew he avoided his wife more and more because she spent the time complaining to him. Being in her presence proved taxing for him. She complained about Elayne neglecting her and that the nurse was giving her medicines that poisoned her.

During this time, Elayne noticed Baron Cedric friendlier than usual toward her. She walked a thin line. She must not be rude toward him. She wanted to brush him away but at the same time, she was flattered. Elayne had no place to go and often thought of her lot once Lady Sibyl passed away. Sibyl's frailty and ill health continued in a downward spiral. At first, Sibyl's mind took her to dark places and she accused anyone who walked into her room as someone who had one purpose. That was to poison Lady Sibyl. This placed the nurses on duty on their guard more than usual. Annie and Elayne each fought the urge to walk away from her when she ranted. Elayne became despondent. Her charge mimicked her own mother's mental illness.

One morning when she came into Lady Sibyl's bedroom she was surprised to see Baron Cedric there, especially so early in the morning. Elayne turned to go back to her rooms until his visit was over.

"Wait, Elayne," he said. "I prefer you remain here while I talk with my wife." His eyes were soft when he talked to Elayne but when he turned back to his wife, his eyes were of steel. Elayne stood inside the doorway and listened when the Baron spoke.

"Sibyl, tomorrow morning I am placing you in a hospital ward in London. Elayne and Annie will pack whatever you wish to take with you. The carriage will leave with you in it at seven sharp."

Sheer panic darted around in Sibyl's eyes. Elayne panicked as well. She had no time to make plans for her future. Baron Cedric took her arm and escorted her to the hallway. He closed the door behind him and turned to his wife's Companion.

"I have no choice. The doctors have told me she will only get worse and she will be too much for you and the others to care for her. One doctor fears she will harm herself though I assured him she is never left alone." Cedric searched Elayne's eyes for a reaction. At first, it

looked as if she would faint. Her face grew pale and she took several short breaths before regaining her composure. "Is there something you wish to say?"

The Baron was swept up with her stark beauty. In the sunlight rays that filtered through the tall window she appeared surreal as if from someplace unknown to him on this earth. He closed his sturdy hand around her upper arm and led her to the window seat. Together they sat down. This was as close as Elayne had been to the Baron of Ayrshire Park. She knew she should shift a few inches from him but it was the last thing she wanted to do and so she remained where she was.

"I must ask you for a favor," said Elayne. "I have made no future plans and must have time to seek employment. I have no place to go once I leave here."

Baron Cedric smiled at her. "I have no intentions of putting you out on the streets. There will be things to finish up here after Lady Sibyl is gone. Her things must be sorted and someone will have to decide which of her possessions to give to charity and which to box up and place in the attic on this wing."

They were interrupted with a cry from Lady Sibyl. Both rushed back into her room.

"What is it, Sibyl?" asked Cedric.

"Before you send me away, I must see Dr. Norris. Please send for him."

The Baron had not been pleased with the minister at Ayrshire Church. He was forty-six years old and unmarried. Cedric knew from his first dinner at Ayrshire Park he appeared to show more attention to Sibyl than was comely. Zachariah Norris was well educated. The family and tenants stayed awake during his sermons. He carried out his church duties in an upright and studious manner. In Cedric's mind, it was the minister's social skills that often did not show the leadership and finesse as expected.

He shrugged his shoulders at Sibyl's request. Her expression was normal as in past years. He decided to grant her wish since he saw no reason not to do so. Elayne was astonished at the turnaround of

Lady Sibyl's mood. The meeting took place between Sibyl and Zachariah just before the evening meal that night. Elayne sat in the Baron's dining room at his request and waited for the plate of sliced venison set in front of her. Baron Cedric Tawnish preferred the main meal be served in the evening rather than mid-day. He worked either throughout the Estate or in his Study most of the day. He ate little between breakfast and the evening. This evening's meal only served the Baron and Elayne. Each dish was prepared as if a large dinner party joined them.

"You must be wondering why I am sending my wife away," he said.

"I accept your earlier explanation, My Lord. I am sure you have thought it all out well and have made the best decision for Lady Sibyl."

He searched her face for sincerity and was not disappointed.

When Elayne bid the Baron goodnight, she ascended the staircase and made her way down the passageway outside Lady Sibyl's rooms and entered hers. The door between her room and the small narrow hallway that connected Lady Sibyl's was slightly ajar. She had no doubt she forgot to close it entirely when she went to Sibyl's rooms earlier. She heard voices. At first she started to close the door but something in the voices told her to listen.

"Zachariah, Cedric wishes to get rid of me. I have no say in the matter. You must help me and talk with him. I do not know which hospital he means for me to get care in. I will surely die much sooner away from my own surroundings."

"Sibyl, I am sure he has chosen one with the amenities you are accustomed to." The minister's voice paused. "I see I have upset you with my words, Sibyl. I will speak with him on my way out. Here, take this powder and swallow it with the water. It is your nighttime potion."

"It is poison," she said.

Apparently, the minister showed her the instructions with it. "It states you take this to rest better at night. I am sure it is not poison."

The minister's voice lowered and Elayne heard no more. She closed

the door softly and started getting ready for bed. Events of the evening disturbed a restful sleep. She thought of her father and how often he told her mother that perhaps she should get care in a hospital ward for a short time. His words, spoken only when Elayne was not caring for her mother, were the only thing that convinced her that Edward recognized the mental illness. He would never admit it to Elayne. If Edward had not loved his wife so much she was sure he would have shipped her off against her will. The difference between care for a grand Lady and Elayne's lowly mother was well known.

The Manor grew silent and only sounds of the wind that shook the windows could be heard by those still awake. Unknown to Elayne, she would not enjoy a full night's rest for a long time in the nights to come. The next morning, as promised, Lady Sibyl was taken to the hospital ward set up for her. The Baron promised her that her stay would be short-lived and as soon as she was better, he would bring her back home.

After bidding his wife farewell, he turned her over to the doctors who placed her in the comfortable carriage and wrapped warmed blankets around her. Lady Sibyl had not spoken. Elayne decided that Dr. Zachariah Norris failed to convince Baron Cedric to keep his wife at home in the care of the present Staff hired for that purpose.

Annie knocked on Elayne's door. It was seven-thirty. She carried a tray in with breakfast for one. Annie's smile reached almost to her ears. "This morning you will enjoy a full breakfast. See? Mable told her cooks to prepare a hearty one for you."

Elayne's mouth watered when she saw thick biscuits, a boiled egg and three thin slices of mutton. "I will never be able to eat that much," she said. She sat down at the small table in the corner of the room and forked the first bite. She rolled it on her tongue and motioned to Annie. "Join me and we will eat together."

Annie laughed. "I have eaten my meal. Beginning tomorrow, you will join the rest of us in the kitchen to eat. Baron Cedric is leaving for a few days."

"When will he return?"

“He rarely stays away for long. You will join him again for the evening meals when he returns. Will you miss him?”

Elayne felt the warmth rise in her face and bent to spread jam on the biscuit. “I will miss him just as everyone else will, I suppose. He told me to remain for a while until Lady Sibyl’s possessions are in order and into boxes.”

Annie stared at her. “Do you mean Lady Sibyl will not be returning? He promised her she would return as soon as she gets well. I thought that’s why you weren’t packing to leave.”

“I only know what he told me. I’m sure I will not be here for very much longer. I will have time to look into another position.” Elayne missed the perplexed look on Annie’s face. “I will finish and bring the tray back downstairs. I’m sure you have plenty to do.”

After Annie left, Elayne thought she heard an unusual sound from the passageway on the opposite side of the wing she was in. It was sudden and stopped just as abruptly. The area where she was became silent. Elayne was used to staying busy all day with Lady Sibyl and didn’t realize outside her quarters all was silent. Everyone was busy in other parts of the Manor. She missed having the nurse coming and going in Lady Sibyl’s room. The stillness was deafening.

Stranger in the Night

The day dragged for Elayne Stanton. She went into Lady Sibyl's room when she heard movement. Two housekeepers were pulling sheets from her bed. One then bundled all laundry into a sheet and tied it together. They looked up when Elayne came in.

"It is empty without My Lady," she said. The two young girls nodded and returned to their tasks. She started to speak again and then stopped. She wished Annie had time to help her with Lady Sibyl's belongings but it was up to her to get started. "Baron Tawnish asked me to sort Lady Sibyl's possessions so I suppose I should get started."

The two looked at one another and did not say anything. They finished the task and then scrubbed down everything that had been used by Lady Sibyl and left. Elayne remembered the empty tray in her room. It would give her a good excuse to be with other people and so she went back to her room and retrieved it. She walked down the back steps and heard cheerful conversations in the large kitchen. Today she much preferred to be a housekeeper or a helper in the kitchen rather than sift through Lady Sibyl's things alone. Mable greeted her and Elayne thanked her for the delicious breakfast.

"Annie told me I am to join all of you for breakfast beginning tomorrow. At least, I will do so until my time is finished here." Elayne felt eyes on her from the hearth. Wilford watched her while he swept the scattered cold embers.

"When will you be leaving?" asked Mable. "You have been one of the best Companions for Lady Sibyl and we will miss you. Everyone hired before you left soon after." Several maids tittered and stopped as soon as Mable threw them a cold warning.

"I will know more when Baron Cedric returns. I do not know how long he will wish for me to stay." Elayne knew everyone knew

something she did not know but was at a loss as to what it was. "I believe some of you are holding back. What is going on?"

"There is nothing amiss going on," said Mable. She began to bark orders to her helpers and they all scurried to their tasks at hand.

Elayne thanked Mable once again. She must get back to Sibyl's room. She was sure Baron Cedric would expect progress made. When she opened the door she noticed several large wardrobes had been brought in. She went to the closet and opened the doors. She gasped. The closet was larger than two bedrooms in her home in Kilmarnock. She had no idea where to begin and so carried several racks of dresses and threw them across the bed. She stopped short again when she thought she heard a deep voice from the opposite side. She recalled being told by Annie that wing was not used. She wondered who could be over there. Elayne felt certain it was the voice of a man. That was impossible, she thought. She decided, since everything was so much quieter than she had known, voices must carry from downstairs.

The day finally ended. Elayne felt comfortable eating with the servants in the large kitchen. The conversations were jovial and teasing. Most included Elayne in the chatter but a few appeared to ignore her. When they finished eating, Elayne stood to clear her dishes. Mable told one of the girls to take the plate and bowl.

"That is their job to clear the table." Mable started swiping the table as the dirty dishes were removed. She left the cloth and motioned for the others to finish. She untied her apron and walked out.

Annie came to Elayne. "I will walk with you to your room, if you want company." Elayne was relieved to tell her yes. They walked down the passageway until they came to the wing not occupied.

"Does anyone live on that wing?" she asked Annie.

"It has been empty for as long as I have been here. We have been told to forget about it and we do not clean it at all. Of course, it would serve no purpose. I suppose if it is ever used again then we will go over there."

They visited for another fifteen minutes in the sitting area at the large windows where she had sat with Cedric. Annie yawned and

both agreed it was bedtime. Elayne latched her door and secured the one that led to Sibyl's quarters as well. Her head hit the pillow and sleep did not come easily since thoughts of the Baron flooded her mind. She had never seen such a handsome man as he was. His dark blue eyes caught her off-guard every time she thought of him. Above all, he was always caring and gentle with her. She liked seeing compassion in a man of his status and strength. He appeared to have every asset she hoped for in the man she would one day marry.

She must find employment before that day. There was no way to meet anyone of that caliber here at Ayrshire Park.

She finally drifted off to sleep. A man's voice, loud and rambling awakened her. It sounded as if he was coming up the staircase. He cursed and then mumbled incoherently. She got out of bed and put her ear to the door. The voice grew closer telling her whoever it was had reached the upper part of the staircase. She knew it wasn't so, but the voice sounded almost identical to the Baron's except for the loud swearing. Whoever it was fell several times on the hard floor and got up again each time. When she was sure he had turned down the opposite passageway, she quietly opened her door to a narrow slit and looked through.

She blinked and looked again. The back of the man appeared to be the Baron himself. She watched until he turned to go down another hallway out of her vision. Elayne was shocked and shook her head. She closed the door again and latched it. She sat on the edge of the bed and rested her feet on the stool. She did not feel the coldness of the room as she forced her mind to recall the sound and the tone of the voice she heard. Elayne was sure it sounded just like Cedric but that could not be true.

Mable Buckler heard muffled noises down the lower hallway. She had just turned in for a good night's sleep. There was no doubt in her mind where the sounds came from. The slurred voice and cursing were all familiar to her. Turning over to block him out, she then sat straight up in bed when she realized the footsteps ascended the front staircase. Usually when he came in late at night or early morning hours, he at least chose to use the back stairs. Mable drew her robe around her and went to the front foyer. He was nearly to the top steps and she clutched her heart hoping he did not awaken

Elayne Stanton.

Elayne found it hard to sleep. Fear clutched her mind and body. The voice of Baron Cedric Tawnish stayed with her. She finally decided that perhaps he drank heavily this one night after sending Lady Sibyl off. She heard some of the maids talk in low voices the day Sibyl left. Buzzing about them boiled down to he had sent her to a mental ward in the hospital. Elayne shuddered at memories of her mother. At last, she cleared her mind enough to sleep until the early morning light fought to break through the heavy draperies. She climbed out of bed and pushed them aside. At least it was a rare sunny day, she thought. Once ready for breakfast, she came down the back steps.

Mable studied her face. She appeared rather wan and there were circles under her eyes. Had the Companion seen someone unrecognizable last night? There was no question that Mable chose not to ask.

Everyone greeted her except for the few who eyed her suspiciously. One woman, who Elayne later learned had been a devoted maid to Lady Sibyl before her illness, spoke.

“Some of us don’t like the ones who feed us. They send off a grand Lady to die alone.” There were a few murmurs at that end of the table who agreed.

For the first time, Elayne felt she had enemies sitting with her. In times before she realized not everyone liked her, but this morning she saw pure hatred in the eyes of the woman who spoke. Mable intensely forbade anyone below her to slander openly those not liked. She glared at the one who spoke and then said, “Leticia, take your breakfast in the alcove today.” Leticia did as commanded but not without an insolent expression on her face.

Elayne finished her breakfast as soon as possible and returned to her rooms. There was plenty to go through yet. Annie promised her that the next day she would have time to help her. Elayne looked forward to friendly company. She turned the key to enter her room when she felt eyes on her. She knew of no one on this wing except her now. The nurses had left and since Lady Sibyl no longer needed care here, the trembles throughout her body reinforced she was

alone. She fumbled for the large key and turned it quickly and opened her door. A few yards behind her stood the Baron. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips curled.

“Good morning, Baron,” said Elayne. She did not expect the harsh laughter that lashed out.

“Baron,” he said, “and I’m to be called Baron at last.”

Elayne was speechless. What was wrong with Cedric? Whatever it was, he was definitely not himself, she thought. Her mind flip-flopped from showing him the respect due him or ignoring him and going on into her room. She was prepared to slam the heavy door quickly and latch it.

“You do not look well this morning,” she said. “Perhaps I can ring for tea if you wish.”

The harsh laugh echoed in the vast foyer. The man had not moved forward. This gave her a chance to go into her room and follow her plans of escape from this man she did not recognize. He did not attempt to follow her. Instead, she heard footsteps return to the empty wing.

For the rest of the morning, Elayne concentrated on her responsibility in regard to packing Lady Sibyl’s possessions. She made sure all doors were secure. When the knock came on her door, she jerked around searching for a weapon. She grabbed the heavy candlestick and waited.

“Elayne, are you in there?” asked Annie. “It is time for our noon meal and you did not come down. Are you all right?”

Tears of relief spilled from her eyes. “I am here. I will be right down.” Elayne placed the candlestick where it was, straightened her hair and brushed her skirt. She hurried to catch up with Annie. She did not wish to be alone if Cedric returned.

“You are as white as a ghost,” said Annie. “Why did you latch the doors?”

“I thought I heard someone from the empty wing,” she lied. “I do not feel comfortable up here by myself.”

“There is no one in that wing but I’m sure it is a little spooky over

here without the activity you became accustomed to. I'm starved," said Annie. "Let's get down there before they eat everything."

During the noon meal, several conversations flowed at once. Those who came in from the Stables told of differences between two workers, and servants from within the house spoke of how difficult it had been polishing silver all morning. One conversation caught Elayne's attention above all of them.

"Today the Baron returns," she said. "That silver must be polished before he gets here."

Elayne caught herself before stating she knew he was already back home. Mable watched her closely. If she had seen anyone in the dark, she wasn't talking, she thought.

Confusion

Elayne worked most of the afternoon. All clothing was sorted. The finer clothes were carefully folded and packed into crates to be taken to the attic over Lady Sibyl's quarters by several houseboys. Mable had told her to let her know when things were ready to be moved. Elayne stopped for hot tea and small cakes delivered by Wilford. The boy said nothing except to identify himself. She opened the door and he set them on her small table.

"Would you like a cake, Wilford?" she asked. The saliva was barely noted at the corner of his mouth. He nodded yes and she told him to choose which of the three he wanted. He grabbed two and hurried from the room.

When she finished the hot tea, Elayne went to the windows on the front of the Manor to close the draperies for the night. She hesitated when she saw the fine carriage pull up to the front door. A footman alighted and waited for Baron Cedric Tawnish to step down. Elayne looked closely at him. He was just as she remembered him. His steps were sure and his brief smile at the familiar footman was the same. She watched his erect shoulders and overall physical appearance. She did not see anything slovenly about him as she had early this morning. She was mystified at how he could have transformed his mannerisms and appearance so meticulously. Above all, how had he managed to leave and then arrive as if away for the last few days?

She drew back quickly from the window. She did not want him to see her. Elayne kept the mystery on her mind the rest of the afternoon. She began sorting her own belongings in preparation for her departure as soon as her job was finished here. She prayed it would be very soon. At the knock on her door, she opened to Annie again.

"The Baron is home again. He has requested your presence with

him at dinner tonight. He wishes to dine at seven sharp.”

Elayne’s hand opened and the shift dropped to the floor. She swayed and leaned against the wall.

“Are you ill?” asked Annie. She reached for her friend’s arm and pulled her to the bed. “Rest here for a few minutes.” She poured a glass of water from the ewer on the table. Elayne took several sips of it and thanked her.

“I will be fine. Will there be guests at the table tonight?”

“I do not believe so. He usually invites guests his second night home. Mable is cooking wild duck tonight.”

Elayne searched her mind for excuses not to dine with the Baron. She dreaded the encounter more than anything. She was sure that the kitchen would buzz. She would be criticized for dining with the Baron since she did not have the reason as in days past. Lady Sibyl would not be the topic of conversation and Elayne wondered what he would say. More than that, she wondered how she would respond.

At seven sharp, Elayne arrived in the dining room. The Baron stood at the buffet and poured two glasses of elder wine. Elayne wondered why he didn’t wait until they were seated for one of the servers to pour the libation.

“Good evening, Elayne,” said the Baron. “I hope you have been well.” He invited her to sit to his right and placed both glasses on the table.

“I have been well, thank you,” she said. She was baffled. The man showed no signs of slovenly looks or behavior. “I hope your journey was a satisfying one.”

With no hesitancy, he replied, “It went well. Lady Sibyl has settled in, I hear. I feel she will receive the best care and I wanted to thank you again for your companionship to her. She used to enjoy reading books on her own.” His eyes were wistful. Elayne concluded that he should have been a great actor on stage rather than Baron of a large estate.

Duck was served with small potatoes and cabbage on the side.

Elayne forced herself to eat as normal but when she swallowed it was as if the food did not go all the way down. She felt the Baron's eyes on her.

"Are you well?" he asked. He knew this was no conversation he should be having with a woman but her ashen countenance startled him.

A slight flush rose in her cheeks. "I feel fine," she said.

She changed the subject and started a conversation about the ending of a long winter. This went much better and she found herself relaxing enough to eat normally. When the sliced pears were set before her she avoided looking at the servant who served dessert. It was the woman who sneered at her in the kitchen. When Leticia left the room, Elayne brought up another subject.

"I am seriously searching for a place of employment once I finish putting Lady Sibyl's things in order. It should be completed by the end of next week, if not sooner."

Baron Cedric did not wish to hear this news. He must find something else for her to do here at Ayrshire Park. He was drawn to her in a way no other woman drew him, including Sibyl at one time.

"Do not make any hasty decisions. I am sure there is a position here so you will not have to begin new someplace else."

He wished he had children. He would hire her as governess. Several of his servants had children but it was unheard of for a Baron to hire a governess for lowly tenants' children or anyone else who kept the estate going. He looked at Elayne. In the candlelight, her dark auburn hair glistened. He had never seen eyes that were the color of coffee. Above all, in contrast to Sibyl, her gentle nature won him over. He realized he stared when she shifted positions in her chair and he quickly lowered his eyes to his dish of fruit.

That night when Elayne fell asleep she did so with mixed feelings in regard to the Baron. When morning came, she arose and dressed as usual, then made her way down the back stairs. At the top of them she thought she heard shuffling down the long hallway that led to the vacant wing. When she stopped she was met with silence that

hung heavy in the air. When she sat down to eat breakfast, there were just six of the usual eleven servants there. Thankfully, Leticia was not one of them. She recalled that when the Baron was home, everyone was on duty in other parts of the Manor. From the conversations, she learned the Baron was on his horse overlooking the tenants' farming duties. Mable always breathed a sigh of relief when the master was home. Things would once more go back to normal.

Annie joined Elayne that morning as promised. In the middle of the sorting and packing, they heard quick steps coming toward the room. Wilford knocked on the door and Annie opened it.

"What is it, Wilford?" she asked her brother.

"It is about My Lady," he said. "Mable sent me to tell you she is dead." Annie's hand flew to her mouth. The boy shook his head vigorously as if expecting her to admonish him for lying to her. "It's true, Annie. She died in the night. Just like that, she did."

Elayne joined them. "Are you sure you have the news right?"

His look of scorn sent her way told Elayne the boy was hurt that she doubted him. "I'm right about all of it," he said. "She is dead and that is all I have to tell you." He shot a look at his sister and then left as fast as he had arrived.

"I can't believe it," said Annie. "It has all happened so quickly. Perhaps sending her to that hospital did her in finally."

"You may be right about that, but remember she was quite ill when she left here." Elayne felt sadness at the news. She wondered how Cedric was taking it.

A few days later, large crowds were drawn to the cemetery near the Ayrshire Church to bury Lady Sibyl Tawnish. Dr. Zachariah Norris officiated. As she was lowered into the ground, the clouds gathered overhead. The wind picked up just as everyone got into carriages. When Elayne started walking with the other servants, the Baron sent his footman to tell her to ride back with him. The Baron led the large entourage to the Manor just as rain pummeled down. In no time at all, the short road to the house turned to mud and large puddles of water.

In the carriage, he spoke to her. "I suppose it is best that all of her clothing and personal items be distributed to the nearby village churches. Most of them have poor congregations. That is, all except her fine clothes. Those will be crated and stored."

Elayne thought all of the clothing looked like fine garments but she understood what he meant. When they went through the front door, servants took wet cloaks from everyone. Cedric spoke briefly to the visitors and then Zachariah said a few words. Cedric picked up a glass of Madeira and went to his Study. Elayne did not remain. Everyone in the room represented upper class society. She knew her position.

A few hours later, noises from downstairs dwindled to silence. She watched the carriages leave from her window. A dismal atmosphere hung in Lady Sibyl's quarters especially. She went back down the narrow passageway to her rooms. Just outside her door, she heard shuffling and cursing. She sighed at the disappointing thoughts that Baron Cedric drank himself into the abyss again. This time, she vowed, she would confront him. How could someone so mellow and gentle around her become this beast? She opened the door to see the drunken man in the upstairs foyer outside her bedroom. He had changed his clothes and looked as if he had just returned from a tavern. She was confused. It had been just a few hours and unless Cedric had left from the back of the manor there was no way else he could have gone without observation of his movements.

The strange man looked at her and leered. He lurched forward and she stepped back but held her ground. "How can you be such a changed man? One time you are gentle and kind and the next time you become this fiend?"

The harsh laugh hit her like sharp pebbles. "I do not change. I am the same as always. Perhaps long ago I was someone else. I don't know for sure." He stumbled. "You think I am drunk. I don't even know if I am or not. I stay the same." He peered at Elayne. "I've watched you. You are a sight for my eyes." Just as he took another step toward her, they were interrupted.

"Go back to your quarters," said Mable. "You know the Baron's orders. If you enter the rest of the house, you will be banned for good."

Elayne gaped. Her eyes darted from this pitiful shell of a man back to Mable who took complete charge.

He looked at Elayne. "You made me the Baron," said the creature. "I could have been if my father had been fair with me."

"Leave now," ordered Mable. The man swayed his way back to the wing that was supposed to be vacant. Elayne, still in shock sent silent questions to Mable. She opened her hands wide and said, "It is not my place to explain things. The Baron will do so if he finds it necessary." She turned and went downstairs.

The Reveal

Elayne decided to give the Baron some time to grieve for his wife. Then she would confront him about the man who looked like him but did not possess the same personality assets. After the recent encounter, he had not appeared again near her rooms. Mable was keeping a tight lip and seemed to ignore her whenever Elayne was anywhere nearby.

Thinking about the creature, otherwise identical to the Baron, brought more ideas to Elayne. They must be brothers to resemble one another in that manner. Could it be that the Baron and Lady decided not to have children in case a mental illness passed down the line? She simply wanted explanations as to why she had never heard about the strange man until now. Above all, was he someone she should fear? The answer to that caused a shiver to run through her.

Several evenings later, Elayne decided the matter could not wait any longer. Cedric's conversations with her were beginning to touch on more personal subjects. He briefly told her the history of Ayrshire Park. As interested as the saga was she was impatient to discuss the man in the so-called empty wing.

"I do not wish to bore you, Elayne," he said. She blushed and then saw that he was sincere.

"I am most interested in the conversation, My Lord, but something has been on my mind for the last few days and I must discuss it with you."

He gave her his full attention. He held his breath hoping she had not found another position someplace else. He had nothing for her except for one and he waited for the right time. He asked her to go on.

"I was approached by a strange man twice while you were away.

He looks exactly like you except he is much more disheveled and rough in appearance.” She heard the clank of his fork on the china plate. “I did not know who he was, and I am most curious.” She swallowed when she noted the wave of anger that rushed over him. “I am sorry. Perhaps I should not mention it.”

Cedric stood and instead of ringing for service, he pushed his way into the kitchen. Elayne heard his voice rise and then recognized Mable’s voice. She could not make out the words but something told her the scene was not a good one. Leticia appeared in the dining room to pick up utensils from the table. Her look was a knowing one that was not kind.

“It sounds as if you have upset the Baron,” she said. “I don’t know what it’s all about but mark my words: you will not be here much longer.” She clanged the china as she stacked everything and then carried them down the narrow hallway to the butler’s kitchen.

Elayne did not know whether she should leave and go to her quarters or wait until the Baron returned. Whatever she said wrong she knew the arguing in the kitchen was because of her questions to the Baron. Before she could decide what to do, he returned. His face was taut but anger had disappeared. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“I am sorry for upsetting you, My Lord,” said Elayne. “I will not bring the subject up again. I bid you goodnight.”

“Join me in the Drawing Room. Mable will bring us coffee and dessert. The three of us must get this out in the air.”

She wondered what Mable had to do with anything but she curtsied slightly and at his request she went ahead of him into the Drawing Room. When Mable came in with the tray, he asked her to close the doors and sit down.

“I wish Elayne to hear everything.” He turned to her and began. “The man you unfortunately came in contact with is my identical twin brother. He arrived in this world a few minutes after I did. When our father died, he did so leaving no will. The law reads that the eldest is heir to everything if this is the case. Since I came first, I naturally am the eldest.”

“Has he been living secluded by himself all these years?”

“My father banned Frederick from Ayrshire Park when Frederick was sixteen. He was given a generous monthly stipend to live on and chose to squander every cent long before each month ended. My father then sent him to a boarding school for boys in London. By the time he was eighteen, he had been thrown out of four such schools. In the meantime, I was obligated to learn everything during those years that I could in regard to the Park.” Mable noticed his cup needed refilling and then offered Elayne some. Elayne declined. Cedric continued the story.

“When Frederick was sent home the fourth time, he began to drink heavily and joined new-found friends at a local tavern. My father lost his patience and banned him for good. He passed away a year later and everything became mine.”

Elayne glanced at Mable. She showed no surprise at the tale which told Elayne the story was not new to her. “When did Frederick return home?”

“To my chagrin, I allowed him to come back several months ago. It was agreed if he did, his allowance would be much less and above all, he was to remain in the south wing. His meals are brought to him and rooms taken care of by Mable. She is the only one here, other than me, who knows he is here, as well as the circumstances of the past.” He looked at his Head of Housekeeping. “She admitted to me tonight that Frederick often goes out to drink and comes home completely wasted. He usually comes in the back way but when I was not here, he took advantage and used the front stairs. That was your first encounter, as I understand it.”

Elayne nodded. She did not say more since she was sure Mable had told him of the most recent encounter.

“You will not have to worry about meeting him again. Tonight is his last night at Ayrshire Park. I will see to that as soon as he returns from the tavern in town. He has no regard for this place and he throws money away as if it is candy to children.”

Elayne wanted to ask where he would go, but she didn’t dare interfere any more than she already had.

“I will prepare quarters for you on the second floor,” said Mable. “The Baron requested this. It is where guests often stay and it is

away from the wing Frederick has been staying in.”

This made Elayne feel better. Even without knowing about Frederick, she felt very uncomfortable so far away from everyone else. When the conversation was spent, Elayne was excused for the night. At the doorway, Cedric called to her.

“I wish to speak more with you after breakfast tomorrow. I will have mine at nine o’clock and will see you at nine-thirty in my Study.”

Elayne wondered if he had a position for her. She hoped so since she had no luck so far in procuring one on her own. She wondered what he had in mind for her. For the first time in a week, she slept soundly.

The next morning, Elayne made her way down the back stairs. Everyone in the kitchen appeared more subdued than usual. She sat down at her place next to Annie. Even Annie was somewhat aloof from her. Had something happened overnight she was not aware of? Elayne spread elderberry jam on the biscuit and took a bite. The only conversation at the table was at the other end between two of the stable boys. They argued over chores and other than that, the others had little to say. When she finished, she turned to Annie.

“Will you be upstairs to finish up with Lady Sibyl’s things?”

“I will not have time today,” she said.

Elayne thanked her for the help she had already given her and then left the table. Mable followed her into the narrow passageway that led to the back stairs.

“Don’t mind any of them,” she said. “They don’t feel as comfortable around you as before.”

“Why is that?” asked Elayne.

“Rumors spread fast and I have no inkling of how any of them found out the news so quickly.” When Elayne’s eyes grew wide with questions, Mable continued. “One of the boys sneaked into the kitchen last night to eat food he is not entitled to. He heard the ruckus in the back hallway when the Baron confronted his brother. The boy heard your name and then Frederick called the Baron his

traitorous brother.”

“Do they believe I have anything to do with it all?”

Mable shook her head as if confused. “They like to gossip. It is the only diversion available. They had no idea the Baron had a brother and of course, were surprised and curious about where he had been living these last few months.” She stopped speaking before she said any more.

Elayne stared at her until comprehension crossed her face. “They think something inappropriate has been going on between Frederick and me?” Mable lowered her eyes. “That’s preposterous. I found out a very short time ago myself.”

“I have spoken with them all before you came downstairs. There is some doubt but I am sure they know you well enough by now to reason things out.”

Elayne climbed the stairs slowly. Whatever position the Baron had for her may not be easy to slip into as long as the others were suspicious of her. She hurried to her rooms and prepared to meet him in his Study. She had fifteen minutes left and she walked to the wide front window in Lady Sibyl’s sitting room. The skies were cloudy and the dismal day was interrupted by a few emerging wildflowers below. She hugged her arms around her and was grateful Spring was on the way. The chilly quarters drove her back to her bedroom where she draped a shawl over her shoulders and descended the front stairs. She knocked lightly on the Study door. The rich baritone voice invited her in.

Baron Cedric stood and gestured to the winged chair in front of the massive fireplace. Wilford had the coals burning and Elayne was sure the boy had taken care of that before he ate breakfast and had stirred the burning wood once more before Cedric arrived. Elayne looked at the tall bookcases that took up most of one wall and for a fleeting moment wondered if the Baron had read all the books.

Cedric sat down in a matching chair which was angled toward hers. He stood up again and she thought he was going to his desk for something but he turned and sat down again. She had never known him to lose control of a situation before and just as she thought he had, he smiled at her. His countenance hit her like a bolt of

lightning and something unfamiliar stirred within her. She focused on his words.

"I am sure you are wondering why I feel this meeting is important enough to interrupt your day." She had never known someone in charge of her to make an apology like that. She squirmed unobtrusively and waited. "I realize you are searching for a position somewhere. I have one to offer you." Elayne presumed that was why she was here. Cedric stood and this time he did go to his desk but didn't pick anything up. Then he came back and sat down.

"I wish to marry you, Elayne," he said. "I hope you accept my proposal. I realize we come from different stations in life but I fell in love with you the day you arrived." He paused. "I always loved Sibyl and I still miss her as she used to be. She was a changed woman by the time you arrived. I remained faithful to her until her last breath but have not mastered sweeping you from my mind. Will you be my wife, Elayne?"

This time Elayne stood up and paced a few steps. She was dumbfounded at his words. "I am from a humble background, My Lord. That is not to say we were bereft of the necessities of life, but I had never entered such a grand house as Ayrshire Park until I was hired as Companion to Lady Sibyl. I know nothing about being Mistress of a manor like this."

"There is nothing to worry about in that regard. I will have Mable show you what is important. She has been with my family since the marriage of my parents. She keeps the staff in order and if you are satisfied with that, then you will simply enjoy being the Lady of Ayrshire Park." He stood and reached for Elayne. "Do you think you could come to love me as I do you?"

That was something that took no more thought on her part. "I do love you. I believe you will be happy with me as your wife." She paused. "There is one thing I have speculated about." He encouraged her to speak of it. "Did you and Lady Sibyl ever want children?"

"Sibyl gave birth to a son. He died two days after birth. After that, she was unable to bear more children. Do you like children?"

"I am an only child and often wished for siblings. I would like to

have several.” She looked closely at him.

“Children are necessary to enliven a rambling manor like this one. You will have as many as you wish.” A dark cloud spread over his eyes. “Frederick and I were very good companions as we grew up. Unfortunately, my father did favor me over him and I am sure that is part of the reason he took the wrong path.”

He smiled at Elayne and pulled her close to him. The kiss he planted on her lips heated her entire body and when she looked up at him, his startling deep blue eyes held the same passion for her.

She had no idea how her life took this sudden and pleasing turn. The one thing she was sure of was that the position she had been searching for was now sealed.

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* * *

Apple Trees and HoneyBees

Young Ladies Don't Go Fishing!

Mrs. Sophie Conroy's lips tightened. "Fishing?" she repeated in glacial tones that threatened to drop the temperature of the warm April day by more degrees than the thermometer could possibly accommodate. "She has gone fishing?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied the butler, who regretted that he was the possessor of the knowledge that distressed the lady of the house. Caines shared his employer's concerns regarding the young lady of the house, Miss Ruth, who showed no interest in any of the womanly arts of sketching, embroidery, playing the piano, arranging flowers, fashion or flirting. Miss Ruth was forthright in her speech, hoydenish in her dress, and more interested in keeping up with her brothers than in grooming herself for the accepted role of a young lady who was expected to marry. Caines had heard Miss Ruth say that she had no intention of marrying anyone, a plan which would certainly devastate Mrs. Conroy, should those deadly words ever be uttered in her presence.

"And with whom, pray, did my daughter go fishing with?"

"With Mr. Daniel and Mr. Benjamin, ma'am. And Mr. Holloway."

Mrs. Conroy's head jerked up as if the butler had said something so ominous that the muscles of her neck had responded involuntarily. "Mr. Holloway? She went fishing with Mr. Holloway?"

It was not the time to tell Mrs. Conroy that this was not the first fishing expedition that had seen the accompaniment of Mr. Holloway with the Conroy twins and Miss Ruth.

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Conroy bit her lip to prevent herself from crying, but she could not halt the words that rushed out. "Caines, my one hope of finding a husband for my daughter is Robert Holloway. He is a good man, of a good family, and he and my sons have been steadfast friends.

The Holloways are excellent neighbors and well thought of in the county. He has always been tolerant of Ruth's peculiar ways . . . I have nurtured hopes that he may disregard her lack of femininity and consider her as a possible prospect for marriage. But how can I continue to hope such things if she will not stop participating in activities which are not the province of a young lady of marriageable age?" she wailed.

It was not the first time that Mrs. Conroy had confessed her frustration to the butler and he had sympathy for her. The Conroys were excellent employers and a closely knit family. But Mrs. Conroy was the odd one out in the family persona. Her sons and her husband loved the outdoors and were content to spend all their days in physical activity. Mrs. Conroy, ladylike and delicate, was a woman of refinement and decorum. She loved her husband dearly, and adored her sons, but she had longed, when Ruth was born, that her daughter would be a girl who could pass hours admiring the fashions in the ladies' magazines, or choosing fabrics in the dressmaker's shop, or practicing what to say when a young man came courting. But Ruth did none of those things. In fact, when younger, Ruth had scandalized her mother by donning her brother's cast-off garments so that she could move without the encumbrance of skirts.

Mrs. Conroy had been so upset that she'd taken to her bed with a headache, although not before sending Ruth to bed without supper and ordering her to remain in the house for the next week, without so much as taking a step out of doors. Mrs. Conroy didn't know, but Caines did because the servants had told him, that Ruth had flouted her mother's orders by climbing out of her window and descending the tree outside her bedroom. And that her brothers and Mr. Holloway had abetted her in her mischief.

"I believe, ma'am," said Caines cautiously, treading warily in the uncharted waters of a servant making an observation about the family which employed him, "that Mr. Holloway is very fond of Miss Ruth."

"Yes, of course he is, he's known her since she was a child," Mrs. Conroy affirmed. "Where is my sal volatile?"

Caines fetched the smelling salts for Mrs. Conroy while she

succumbed to her palpitations and sat down on the settee in a limp surrender.

Restored, at least physically, Mrs. Conroy continued, "But that does not mean that he will tolerate such behavior in a wife. Men are very particular about the women they marry."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I shall tell Mr. Conroy. He simply must take a firmer hand with her. It's no use my trying, she pays no heed to what I say. I never know what will come out of that child's mouth, Caines, I vow to you that I do not. She is capable of uttering any outlandish thing that flies into her head. I am sure I do not know how I failed. I believed that I have been a good mother, I certainly tried my best, and yet I have failed." A dainty wisp of a handkerchief appeared in Mrs. Conroy's hand so that she could dab at her eyes.

"No, ma'am," Caines disagreed. "Miss Ruth is merely spirited."

"A thoroughbred may be spirited, Caines, but a young girl of marriageable age cannot be," declared Mrs. Conroy. "And even the most spirited thoroughbred, one with an admirable pedigree must, be it ever so fast or ever so fleet, bend to the bridle and bit. The same is true of young women. I don't dare present Ruth in society for fear of what would happen. I can hardly force her to attend a ball. I confess, Caines, I am at my wit's end. Mr. Conroy must see the fix we are in. What are his plans for the evening, do you know? Of course, I'm only the wife and mother of the family, there's no need for my husband and children to let me know whether they intend to dine at home tonight."

"I believe the young gentlemen are going to a party with friends, ma'am, but will be home to dress for the occasion. Mr. Conroy did mention that he would be home late, ma'am; I believe he is meeting for supper with several other gentlemen to discuss safeguarding the realm in the event of invasion."

Mrs. Conroy's handkerchief flapped frantically. "That odious Bonaparte! I tell you, Caines, that if a French ship so much as enters the Channel, I shall be prostrate. On top of all that I have to deal with, I simply cannot tolerate an invasion by the French as well."

"I'm sure the gentlemen have it well in hand, ma'am, and of course the government will be vigilant. "

"Oh, the government," Mrs. Conroy said sarcastically. "My late father used to say that the government was good for nothing but spending other people's money. Taxation, you know," she said vaguely, waving her handkerchief for emphasis. Naturally she understood very little of such matters and was not expected to, but her father was an endless source of wisdom on such subjects as the failings of the government. Her husband was less cynical, but then Albert, who held local offices in the county, regarded himself as part of the government, albeit on a lower rung of the English ladder of power.

"Of course, ma'am. May I get you anything, ma'am?"

"No, thank you. But please tell me as soon as Mr. Conroy arrives. I simply must speak to him about Ruth and I won't be put off a moment longer. He indulges the girl beyond tolerance and it's time he remembered that it's a father's duty to make his daughter behave. No one is going to marry her if she does not comport herself in an appropriate manner. But that's not the only risk, Caines. Her conduct will ruin her brothers' chances of making successful matches and they are of an age when it's time to begin thinking seriously of such matters. What family will want to be joined with the likes of the Conroys if they find out that Ruth so flagrantly scorns the conventions of respectable society?"

Her Father's Girl

Mr. Albert Conroy was in fine spirits as he walked into his fashionable country home later that evening. His evening had not gone precisely as Caines had told Mrs. Conroy, but was of no importance because Albert Conroy knew that Caines would divulge his plans to Mrs. Conroy, and so he had fabricated an alibi. Meeting with the local men of the county to discuss a possible invasion by the French was an excellent ruse. But in truth, he had been visiting a neighbor who had a filly for sale, a beautiful chestnut who would be perfect for Ruth, who liked a horse that had some spirit to it, and not one of the tame mounts that her mother preferred her to ride. After the sale, he had dined in the local tavern with a most entertaining gentleman who did a bit of business smuggling French goods, who had sold his wares to Mr. Conroy at what seemed to be a very good price.

He returned home late, whistling as he arrived, thinking of how delighted Ruthie would be when she saw her new horse. Caines met him at the door and helped him off with his coat.

"Mrs. Conroy is in her upstairs sitting room, sir," Caines told him.

"Eh? She's still up? I thought she'd have gone to bed an hour ago." That thought had dictated his time of departure. Had he known that his wife was still awake, he'd have postponed his return home for another hour or so.

Albert Conroy sighed. Sophie must be gearing up for battle. "What's Ruthie done now?" he asked Caines.

"I believe that Miss Ruth went fishing today sir."

"Fishing!" Mr. Conroy chuckled. "Good day for it. I wish I'd known, I'd have joined her. Did she catch anything?"

"I—er—I believe she did, sir. Cook will be serving it for supper tomorrow night, I believe."

“Excellent, excellent. Ruth is quite an angler, Caines, always has been, Even when she was still in a pinafore, she could bait a hook without any vapors.”

“Yes, sir,” Caines agreed, although he was privately of the opinion that a woman with refinement should most definitely have vapors at the thought of touching a worm.

“In fact, I venture to say, though she is my own daughter and I ought not to boast, that she can keep up with her older brothers whether she’s firing a pistol, riding a horse, or shooting a bow.”

“Yes, sir,” Caines said glumly, marveling at a father who could be so blind to the disadvantages of a daughter who excelled in the manly arts and was an abysmal failure in the womanly ones. Mrs. Conroy was sorely tried in her efforts to maintain a respectable English household. “Mrs. Conroy asked me to let you know sir, upon your arrival home, that she would like to speak with you before you retire for the night.”

“Yes, well, the thing is, Caines, I’m dashed weary. Busy day, you know, and Mrs. Conroy is apt to be long-winded when she’s agitated. What do you say that you tell her you did not see me come home? There’s a good chap,” Mr. Conroy said, speaking quickly so that Caines had no recourse but to nod mutely as the master of the house quietly stole down the corridor to his private study.

Albert Conroy entered his study stealthily, as if fearful that the sound of the doorknob turning would alert his wife to his presence. Sophie was a good woman and a good wife, but she was taxing on the subject of their daughter and after a convivial evening and a refreshing round of smuggled brandy at the tavern, her husband was not in a humor to be plagued by a litany of Ruth’s faults and the woe that would betide the Conroy family if someone—meaning Albert—failed to do something.

Albert didn’t perceive what on earth he was supposed to do. Ruthie was as she was and if she met the right man, he’d be entranced by her liveliness. Not all men wanted to be bored to their dying day by a woman whose interests were confined to her drawing room. It hadn’t been his intention to nurture his daughter’s tomboyish ways,

but she'd followed her brothers everywhere, even as a toddler, and it had seemed entirely natural to bring her along when Daniel and Benjamin—and Robbie Holloway, too, who was always at their side—were learning to ride their ponies. Poor Robbie wasn't much of an equestrian, but the boys rode as if they were born to it, and of course Ruthie had been determined to be able to keep up with her brothers as they galloped across the countryside. At some point, and he was not sure how or when, she had learned to shoot along with her brothers. Although of course not in public; he wasn't such a complete idiot to allow her to practice in public view. But he was proud of her expert marksmanship, as were her brothers, who boasted of her ability to hit the mark from a farther range than they could manage.

Mr. Conroy smiled as he pictured the expression on Ruthie's face when she beheld the filly he'd purchased for her. Why, when the groom from Cressing-on-Dart came by to drop off—

Mr. Conroy's smile faded. Dash it all, if Sophie found out that he'd bought their daughter a new horse, and moreover, one that was an equine mirror to their vivacious and outgoing daughter, she'd be livid with fury. She wanted Ruthie to abandon her riding in favor of a carriage, her riding habit doffed for ball gowns, and her fingers playing the piano not shooting a pistol. Ruthie was a dreadful pianist, and had finally refused, when asked on social occasions, to take a turn playing for guests. She'd cheerfully admitted that she had no ear for music, a confession which had mortified Sophie, who felt she was saddled with a daughter who failed to hold up the obligations of her gender.

Well . . . he'd see to it that Ruthie got some new clothes, that might assuage Sophie's ire. Throw in a new riding habit into the assortment and Ruthie might not be so annoyed. Females were so much harder to manage than males, Albert Conroy thought as he poured himself a glass of brandy—not smuggled in and not nearly as tasty—and sat down upon the comfortable cushions of his sofa. All he had to do as a father was make sure that his sons' gambling debts were paid and that their occasional dalliances with a bit of muslin were kept from their mother's knowledge. They were good lads; the gambling debts were minimal and infrequent, and the female companionship discreet. They were young men, after all.

Mr. Conroy puffed contemplatively upon his cigar and pondered his dilemma. Sophie didn't need to know that he'd purchased the horse for Ruthie. She never went to the stables and didn't ride herself. As long as she didn't encounter the groom, and there was little likelihood of that, the most she'd know was that he'd added to the horses in the stables. She wanted her boys to be smart in their appearance, to make a dashing show of things, and she knew that the boys had never denied Ruthie anything.

Mr. Conroy brightened as his cigar waned. The dilemma was solved. Sophie would never notice, and Ruthie was smart enough, when in her mother's presence, not to fan the flames. True, she didn't do anything to douse them once her mother got going on Ruthie's failings, but Sophie was the one who started it, and of course Ruthie had to defend herself. If only Sophie would learn to appreciate their daughter's unique character, Albert Conroy thought, his home would be so much more serene.

The Gauntlet is Thrown Down

Mr. Conroy leaned forward in his chair, anticipating the delectable spectacle of the meal to be revealed when Caines removed the silver lid from the dinner platter. He was in a mood for a fine piece of fish and the fact that Ruthie had caught it would add to the flavor that Cook would conjure, as she always did, with her mouth-watering recipes.

Caines lifted the lid with a flourish, knowing how much Mr. Conroy relished the pageantry of the dinner table.

“That’s mutton,” Mr. Conroy croaked as he stared at the uncovered dish.

Ruth, who despite her own preferences, always dressed formally for dinner in order to please her mother, stared as well. “Where’s the fish I caught yesterday?” she asked. “Cook said she was going to serve it tonight.”

“I told her we were having mutton instead,” Mrs. Conroy said stubbornly, meeting her daughter’s eyes as the two glared at each other with matching brown bullet stares. “I told her that we are not poor and we do not depend upon the young lady of the house to procure our food for us.”

“It was a lovely fish,” Ruth cried out. “Cook said so; she was eager to fix it. I cleaned it for her and she rubbed it in lemon---

At the disclosure that Ruth had cleaned the fish, a process so vulgar and unfeminine that Sophie Conroy, who had a vivid but limited notion of what was entailed in the process, began to swoon. Caines reached her first, vigilant as always with the *sal volatile*.

“Really, Mother,” Ruth said without sympathy, “do you think that mutton comes to the table miraculously dressed and minus its fur and bones?”

Mrs. Conroy wavered in her chair as if she would topple to the ground at any minute. "Do, I pray you," she whispered faintly when she had managed to recover from the ordeal, "desist in such talk before I am stricken again. A young lady of breeding does not discuss the unfortunate means by which a dish served for a meal was delivered to a state of edibility. "

"Why ever not?" Ruth demanded in a forceful tone that was a harbinger, her father knew, of a row. Ruth did not initiate the discord, but once the sour note was struck, she joined the dissonant chorus with alacrity. "Should we pretend that the tasty pheasant which we so enjoy has not been plucked of its feathers before it shows up on our plates? How do you suppose those excellent joints arrive before us if not for the arduous work of---"

"I will not listen, I will not listen!" Mrs. Conroy exclaimed, putting her hands to her ears as her daughter, possessed by the imp of mischief which seemed to command her when she and her mother were at odds, continued to detail the physical parts of the table offerings which had been displayed before them in recent dinings.

"Ruthie," Albert Conroy coaxed, "you're distressing your mother."

"It's about time you said something to defend me!" his wife announced in pained tones. "You allow our daughter so much freedom that she now feels entitled to insult me as she pleases. I am a pariah in my own household, and my own daughter is determined to punish me for being her mother. I have always put your wellbeing, and that of your brothers', before my own. I have unfailingly thought only of you and what thanks do I get? At my own table, under my own roof, in my own home, I am berated in a manner which the lowliest servant would not tolerate. What do I ask of you, Ruth? What do I ask? I ask—no, I beg, do I not? I plead. Do not deny it, you know the truth of what I say. I beseech you to conduct yourself in the manner of a proper young lady, so that you can make a respectable marriage to a gentleman. Is this not all that I ask?"

Ruth stood up from her chair. Twin spots of color tinted her smooth cheeks, but in Caines' opinion, that was good fortune as it prevented Mrs. Conroy from realizing that her daughter had, judging from the golden glow of her skin, spent the day out of doors

again, with no bonnet to protect her from the sun, which was always eager to ruin a young lady's ivory complexion. It was not the first time that Caines had stood in the dumb department of a well-trained butler as the female Conroys set forth in discord.

"I shall not marry!" Ruth declared. "I shall not be a pliant miss who must be told what she can do every hour of the day, first by her mother who will never be satisfied with my behavior, or later by a husband who will refuse to recognize that I am myself and not a reflection of who he is. I shall decide my fate, not convention! I shall not wed a man unless he can defeat me in race on horseback!"

Mrs. Conroy howled, her face crumpling in tears. "How can you say such a thing?" she sobbed. "How can you hate me so much that you treat marriage as if it were a contest in a village fair? How can you —"

"My dear," Mr. Conroy interrupted, "please do not distress yourself. I am sure that when Ruthie meets the right sort of man, she'll marry him. Won't you, Ruthie?" he asked, indicating with a nod of his head that she was to obey her cue and concur.

"Certainly!" Ruth returned.

"There, my dear, you see?" Mr. Conroy comforted his wife. "Ruth will marry—"

"The right sort of man will be the one who can best me in a race on horseback," she finished his sentence for him. "And he shall have a devil of a time doing it, with me riding my new horse, Bathsheba."

Mrs. Conroy, torn between her horror of her daughter's language and her disbelief that her daughter had named a horse after a woman of sullied virtue in the Bible, continued to cry loudly, her chest heaving with the weight of her anguish and the burden that she, a lone woman struggling with a family that failed to recognize the importance of maintaining one's standards, was forced to bear. "No gentleman of breeding would accept such a challenge," she moaned. "No one will marry you! You will live out your days a spinster, alone and childless, with no husband and no family! My heart will be broken, but what is that to you? You will be ever deprived of the comfort of a family—"

"I should think you singularly without comfort as a result of having a family, given how you are reacting now," Ruth said swiftly.

Her words merely served to exacerbate the flood of tears which were escaping from Mrs. Conroy's eyes in rivulets of sorrow.

Ruth did not wish to bring her mother to such torrents of grief. But she was as much a prisoner of her own personality, plain spoken and frank and utterly without artifice, as her mother was bound by the shackles of convention which decreed that women in polite society followed one path, men another, and there was no merging of the routes. The two Conroy women, at times such as these, were strangers to one another. Caines watched in helpless dismay as Ruth, stymied by her mother's excessive emotions and hurt by what she regarded as a failure to love her as she was rather than the daughter that Sophie Conroy wanted, strode out of the room and slammed the door behind her as she exited.

Albert Conroy sighed. The two women he loved most in the world were, it seemed, destined to spend another night in disunion.

"Caines," he directed, "please carve the mutton. It appears as though just Mrs. Conroy and I will be dining."

His wife bestowed upon him a look of such horror that Albert Conroy's mouth fell open.

"You are the most insensitive man in England!" she cried. "How can you think of eating at a moment such as this? Our family is in abject ruins and yet you can contemplate eating!"

"I'm hungry," he replied, "and there's no sense in letting Cook's excellent meal go to waste. As I have been deprived of the delights of fish which I anticipated—"

This was beyond tolerance. Mrs. Conroy, her ever-present bit of cambric by now soggy with her tears, arose from her chair as if she had been ejected, and followed her daughter's route out of the dining room.

Mr. Conroy sighed again. "Caines," he repeated in the resigned tones of a man who knew that he had lost a battle but that the war was ongoing, "please carve the mutton. I do not propose to go to bed hungry, even if the women chose to do so."

Sympathy and a Secret Plan

As she had known they would be, her brothers were properly sympathetic the next day when they met at the stable for their usual morning ride and Ruth shared with them the events of the previous evening.

“Did you really say that?” Benjamin asked? “That you won’t marry a man unless he can beat you in a horse race?”

“Yes, I did,” she told them defiantly. “And I meant it.”

“I’ve never known you to say anything you didn’t mean,” Daniel acknowledged. He started to laugh. “Dashed if I know a man who could keep up with you on horseback,” he said. “Ben and I have the devil of a time trying.”

“Well,” Benjamin considered, “there’s a jockey I saw racing a Newmarket last year. Amazing whip. I reckon he might be able to give our little sister a run for her money.”

“Just fancy what the Mater would do if Ruthie donned racing colors,” Daniel pointed out.

“I’d throw a wager on you, sis,” Benjamin vowed. “I fancy I’d make a bit of money, too. That’s the thing, Ruth. You ought to be a jockey. You’re slender as a whippet and strong as . . . whatever one is strong as,” he said. “You must run away from home and try horse racing. You’ll have to pretend to be a chap, however, so it’s apt to get a bit tricky. But as Mother doesn’t frequent the race track, she’ll never know.” He patted the chestnut admiringly. “Reckon you could do it on Sheba, too, if you were of a mind to. She makes Lightning look lead-footed.”

Ruth tolerated her brothers’ banter good-naturedly. They were never shocked by her outrageous comments as her mother was and she knew that their teasing was all in fun. The affection between the siblings was strong and even though they were not a

demonstrative family, the offspring of Albert and Sophie Conroy were linked by bonds that were all the stronger for not being displayed.

Despite their advantage in height which came from their father, the Conroys resembled one another in taking after their mother. They had inherited her expressive dark eyes framed by thick black lashes and, like hers, their eyes revealed what they were thinking before they spoke a word upon the subject. They had the profile of their grandfather, Sophie Gelling Conroy was heard to say proudly: a straight, even nose; a lean jaw and a dignified chin. However, when not in profile, the Conroy youth remained attractive and appealing. They shared a malleable, expressive cast of lips and a warm expression which revealed a love of mischief that they had never quite outgrown despite their ascent from childhood to adults.

“Never fear, Ruthie, someone will marry you,” Benjamin assured her. “There’s got to be someone in England who can beat you at racing.”

Daniel was less sanguine. “We might have to go to Newmarket to see if any jockeys are looking to marry,” he said. “I’d lay odds at White’s window that there’s no one in the ton who can beat our Ru in a race. Now, a professional, that might be different.”

Although she was irked at Benjamin’s assertion that she could be beaten in a horse race, Ruth fell into laughter at Daniel’s proposal that she should seek a jockey for a husband. “Can you imagine how Mother would react to that?” she pointed out.

“Well,” Benjamin said, sounding practical, “she’ll have to accept a compromise at some point. She can’t have it both ways and neither can you. She’s on us about settling down, too, you know. She’s already got our brides picked out for us. She wants me to court Louisa Spires—”

“Louisa Spires!” Ruth exclaimed. “She’s as dull as ditchwater, always prattling on about her beaux and what she’s going to wear to the next occasion. You’ll die of yawning if you marry her.”

“It’s no better for me,” Daniel complained. “She’s been frightfully cozy with Mrs. FitzAllen, and you know that they’re eager to marry off that bluestocking daughter of theirs so that they can launch

Lettie in a grand London debut.”

“Hettie isn’t so bad,” Ruth defended. “She’s a bluestocking, but at least she’s not rattle-brained. She has thoughts in her head. I don’t mind talking to her.”

“Talk away, but I’m not marrying her. I say, Ru, we’re off to town, but Mother needn’t know. She’ll only fuss.”

“What’s going on in town?”

“Oh, a bit of sport,” Daniel said evasively.

“Is it a cockfight or a wench?” Ruth asked knowingly.

“Ru! No wonder Mother rails. You sound . . . “

“She sounds just like you and me, and that’s why Mother is so irritated. We sound just like Pa, and that means no refinement at all. But you’ll cover for us, won’t you?”

“I’ll tell her that you’ve gone off to London to talk to the bishop about taking holy orders,” Ruth grinned.

The Conroys grinned. “And Ru, keep Rob out of mischief while we’re gone, won’t you?”

The grins widened. Robert Holloway was more likely to be rescuing the twins and their sister from a predicament than to end up in one.

“We’re on our way over there for lunch,” Daniel said. “I’ll tell Rob about your challenge so that he knows he’s got no chance of wooing you, not the way he sits a mount.”

Ruth smiled. Robert was a terrible horseman, but a fine companion and she wouldn’t mind the absence of her brothers nearly as much with Rob around. He liked being out-of-doors as much as the Conroy siblings and even at age twenty-three, with his Oxford degree, he was always willing to join them. His interests in nature were different from the Conroys; Robert was fascinated by the intricacies of the trees, the habits of the animals, even the activities of the insects. He was never without his sketchpad, capturing the images that were easily disregarded. It was an odd pastime, perhaps, but the Conroys were used to it and admired his work.

Lunch was waiting for the brothers at the Holloways. As he greeted them, Robert explained that his parents were out and his sister was spending a fortnight in London with friends.

“So lunch is very simple, I’m afraid,” Robert apologized with a smile as he led them into the dining room.

“Simple will do very well. We’re off to London and we wanted to ask you to look in on Ruth for us while we’re away,” Daniel said. “She and Mother had another row last night—“

“A corker—“ Benjamin broke in. “Ma pushed the nuptials and Ru said she won’t marry a man unless he can beat her in a horse race.”

“A horse race?” Robert’s face remained impassive as he carved slices of chicken for their sandwiches. “That seems a singularly odd way to choose a husband.”

“Yes, well, there’s no denying that Ru has some singularly odd ideas about marriage. She and the Mater squabble about it all the time now that Ru is getting up in years.”

Robert laughed. “She’s twenty. That’s hardly cause for alarms of spinsterhood.”

“It is for females,” Benjamin said. “Mother is convinced that Ru is going to end up unmarried and alone, childless, forlorn.”

“I hardly think that will happen,” Robert said as he poured ale for the brothers.

Benjamin and Daniel shared a knowing glance. “It may if someone doesn’t soon make an offer for her.”

“It sounds as though merely offering for her will not do,” Robert observed, passing around a platter of freshly sliced bread still warm from the oven. “Not if she’s choosing a husband for his equestrian skills.”

“If a man wants to marry Ruth, he’d do well to tutor himself on his saddle skills,” Benjamin declared. “Ru isn’t going to be a wife like most women will, but to my mind, she’ll be as loyal a wife as a man could ask for, as long as he doesn’t mind the fact that she can’t sing a note nor sew a stitch and she has no prattling chat in her.”

“I think any man would count himself well served to do without those things,” Robert said gravely, “if Ruth would consent to be his wife. A horse race, you say . . . interesting. Most interesting.”

Who Will Marry A Woman Who Likes to Fish?

"I thought I'd find you here," Robert said.

"Shhh, I've got a nibble," Ruth told him. She was seated on the bank of the creek, her fishing pole taut as a fish on the other end struggled to free itself.

Robert took out his sketchpad and, seating himself at an angle, began to draw. Ruth leaned forward, her expression vivid with expectation as she and the fish fought. Then, suddenly, the line slackened.

"Blast!" Ruth said without malice. "I suppose he was too smart for me."

"Perhaps the next one won't be," Robert said without looking up, his eyes on his sketching.

"It's not worth it anyway," Ruth said glumly. "I caught that perfectly splendid fish the other day and do you know that Mother refused to allow Cook to serve it for supper? She ordered mutton instead. The servants ate it. Cook did say it was very fine indeed," Ruth recalled. "But Mother was mortified that I'd caught a fish to eat. She said that the young lady of the house isn't to be procuring food for the family."

"I suppose many mothers may think the same way, instead of being glad that a daughter has a talent for it."

"Mother doesn't think it's a talent," Ruth said in morose tones, putting down the fishing pole, her joy in the activity diminished at the recollection of the argument she and her mother had had. "She thinks it's an embarrassment."

"Only think if you were to immigrate to America and you were

living in the wilderness. I daresay a knack for procuring your food would not come amiss,” Robert said.

“I’d love to go to America,” Ruth said with enthusiasm. “I’d be outside all the time, farming and cutting wood and hunting. Real hunting, not this prettied up business with foxes and hounds, but genuine prey who can fight back. They have fiercesome creatures over there, you know.”

“So I’ve heard,” Robert said, tilting his head and studying her before making an adjustment to his sketch. “Why not stay here and fish instead?”

“If Mother has her way, I won’t be able to do that,” Ruth said. “She wants me to marry.”

“Then marry a man who wants a wife who can fish.”

Ruth sighed. “I don’t know anyone who has a husband of that sort.”

“Very good thing, because you don’t want to be stealing someone else’s husband merely so that you can procure his supper.”

Ruth’s laughter pealed out into the somnolent afternoon. It was a sunny day and nature seemed to be taking a nap, judging from the quiet that surrounded them. The trees encircling the creek were dark, stately green curtains, dappled with sunlight and shadows. Ruth was sitting on the grass and Robert knew that she would not be sitting on a blanket to protect her garments. It was not in her nature to do so. His trousers were also going to show signs of grass-sitting, if it came to that, but it was different for a girl.

“I should ask Mother if she would prefer that I seek a husband among those who are already wed.”

“I should make sure that her smelling salts are within reach if you ask her that,” Robert advised. “There, what do you think?”

He handed her the sketch pad. The likeness was of Ruth, her slender body alert to the pull of the fishing pole, her chestnut tresses falling around her cheeks. The image showed a young woman of beauty whose spirit seemed ready to burst from the paper.

“Oh, Robbie, I’m sorry. You wanted to draw a fish wriggling on the line and I failed you. The fish got away,” she apologized, giving the

sketchpad back to him.

"You haven't failed me," he answered, putting his pencil away.

She smiled. Robert was always so agreeable and easy to get along with. "It's a beautiful day, is it not?"

"A warm one as well."

"Oh, take off your coat, won't you? It's far too fine a day to be so formal. And you're only with me; there's no reason to stand on ceremony."

Robert stood up in a smooth easy motion, removed his coat, and hung it on a tree branch.

Watching him, Ruth noticed that he was as graceful as a dancer in his physical actions; there was a seamlessness to his movements. It was too bad that he wasn't nearly as fluid when riding, she thought. They were quite opposites, really; she walked, her mother had told her, as if she were on her way to put out a fire. But on a horse, her brothers had told her that she was the next thing to a centaur, completely united with the movements of the horse.

"I suppose that others in the village would see it differently," he commented. "Are you still fishing?"

"No, why?"

"Because I want to throw stones into the creek and watch the water ripple, and if you're intent on victory over the fish, I shall be a nuisance."

She laughed. Robert always made her laugh. "Throw stones," she said. "I'll wager I can throw farther."

Robert grinned and handed her a stone. "Try and see," he urged.

She had a good arm for throwing, but so did Robert, and the competition ended in a draw. Bearing him no ill will for his competence, Ruth unknotted the knapsack she had brought with her and spread out the food inside.

"A picnic!" Robert said with pleasure. "It's been awhile since we've had that. We used to always have them as children. Do you

remember? We'd each bring food—"

"We'd all steal something from the kitchen, do you recall? It couldn't be something that the servants gave to us, we had to earn it. I wonder if they knew what we were up to and just made it easy for us. When I told Cook I wanted to bring food out with me today, she simply handed me some hardboiled eggs, a wedge of cheese, half a loaf of bread and some strawberries. And she winked."

"She must have assumed that you were either ravenous or that you were going on a picnic with someone," Robert noted, tearing a piece of bread from the loaf and handing it to her.

"They know that you always went on our adventures with us," Ruth replied, "and as Ben and Daniel are off to London, they likely assumed that I was meeting you."

"Your brothers had rather interesting news," he said, accepting the flask of water from her hands and taking a sip, just as they had done when they were children.

"About their trip to London? I suppose they're going to do something that Mother wouldn't approve of, but she won't berate them for it the way she would me."

Robert gave her a good-humored glance. "I hardly think that you would be heading to London for the same sort of exploits that your brothers are intent on," he said.

Ruth giggled. "No," she admitted. "But it's deuced unfair, all the same. Mother wants me to marry."

"Daughters do marry," he acknowledged. "They marry sons from other families. It's rather a tradition in these parts."

"Oh, Robbie," Ruth laughed aloud. "You have such a serious way of saying funny things. You know what I mean."

"I do. Your mother wishes to see you married so that you are not alone. She wants to see you with a husband who loves you and a family."

"You make it all sound very staid."

"I don't think love is staid," he replied. "I think you've come up

with a most ingenious way of choosing a husband, if what Daniel and Benjamin told me is correct.”

“They told you? Well, I suppose they would. And there’s no reason not to. Yes, I told Mother that I won’t marry a man unless he can beat me in a horse race,” Ruth said with satisfaction, leaning her back against the trunk of a tree and taking a generous bite out of the rustic sandwich she had created with a piece of cheese and bread. “I fancy I’ll be a spinster for the rest of my life.”

“Do you mean it? That you will only wed the man who defeats you in a race?”

“Yes, of course I mean it. How could I ever endure marriage to a man who wanted me to be cooped up all day, when I’ve grown up spending so much of my time outside like this, fishing and taking walks and climbing trees. You remember, Rob, when we were children, how we played. We were outside all the day long. I miss those days,” she said with a sigh. “How could I marry a man who would rather entomb a wife because convention says that women must not do this and ought not to do that?”

“How, indeed?” Robert asked, returning the flask to her. “Your brothers say that your new horse is very fast. Is she the fastest you’ve ever ridden?”

Diverted from talk of her marriage challenge, Ruth turned to Robert and eagerly began to regale him with details of Bathsheba’s prowess at racing. Robert listened, and smiled, thinking as he did that Ruth was the most beautiful young woman of his acquaintance, and that no man in possession of his wits would ever want her to change to suit convention, when her unconventional self was exactly what he loved about her.

Robert and Riding

The next day threatened rain and Ruth knew that if she went outside, her mother would rail until Ruth either stormed upstairs in a temper or disobeyed her and went out anyway. The argument that Ruth and Mrs. Conroy had had was yet unresolved. Mrs. Conroy was not speaking to Ruth, and Ruth, impatient with such tactics, chose topics to discuss at the supper table which she knew would rile her mother. Mr. Conroy, pinioned between the two women of the household, wished that the boys would return from London so that there would be at least a semblance of accord at the dining table.

Caines, skewered between the elder Conroys' distress, wished the same. But more than that, he wished that Miss Ruth would simply accept the fact that she was a girl and stop trying to be like her brothers. Society was different for men and that was all there was to it. When he expanded upon this theory, he was met by a wall of silence from Cook, who had a fondness for Miss Ruth and her lively ways. As Cook could remain silent longer than Caines could talk, the atmosphere down stairs was no more harmonious than it was upstairs.

So it was with genuine warmth when Caines opened the door to admit Robert Holloway, who entered with an apology for his damp state as he divested himself of his coat and hat.

"It's always a pleasure to see you, Mr. Holloway," Caines said. "I shall see if Mrs. Conroy is at home."

"Actually . . . actually, Caines, it's Miss Conroy that I've come to see," Robert said, his face slightly pink at the admission.

"Miss Conroy? Of course. I'll see if she's . . . at home."

While the lady of the house might be at home but not receiving callers, one never knew if Miss Ruth was at home or out on one of

her escapades. She wasn't the sort to let rain stop her. But a swift consultation with the maids disclosed that Miss Ruth was indeed at home and was in the library.

"As you are practically one of the family," Caines said as he ushered the visitor up the stairs, "I suppose it will be all right for you to see Miss Ruth alone. I shall let Mrs. Conroy know that you are here. I'm sure she will wish to see you."

Robert smiled obligingly, realizing that stodgy old Caines was bending the rules of convention to allow him to be alone with Ruth, even briefly, without a chaperone present, and had taken care to warn him that Mrs. Conroy would be notified of his presence. He thanked Caines and entered the library, leaving the doors open in deference to convention.

Caines smiled appreciatively and went on his way to inform Mrs. Conroy that young Mr. Holloway had called.

Ruth was in the library, sitting at one of the mahogany tables, deep in a tome on horse breeding. She started when Robert entered and greeted her.

"Oh, Rob, hello; I didn't even hear you come in."

"Caines was good enough to allow me to enter without a chaperone, but he's gone to fetch your mother, so there's not a lot of time. I have a favor to ask."

"Of course," she said immediately, closing the book.

"My father has told me that I need to improve my riding. Now that I'm home from Oxford and he's expecting me to take up my responsibilities, he says I need to look as if I know the difference between a pommel and a sack of potatoes."

Ruth's laugh, a throaty expression of amusement that was entirely without artifice, pealed out. "Oh, Rob, you're not that abysmal a rider."

"It's very kind of you to say so, but I'll never make a cavalier. Nonetheless, Father isn't asking for much and I do want to improve. The favor I'm asking is if whether you would consent to go riding with me every day, so that I may become more adroit on the back

of a horse. Will you?"

He looked so earnest that for a moment, he didn't seem like familiar, companionable Robbie, with whom she had shared childhood adventures burying treasure in the woods when they were pirates or climbing trees to scout out the Sheriff of Nottingham's men when they belonged to Robin Hood's Merry Men. He looked the same, with his thick, tousled flaxen hair and his warm amber eyes, and he had the same leisurely posture that concealed his true height. He hadn't changed at all, and she wasn't sure what had made her think that he had.

"Of course I will," she said. "I'll be delighted to. You know that I appreciate any excuse to go riding. Especially now that the twins plan to spend a month in London."

"Yes, I know, they sent word." The twins had sent a message to their friend, inviting him to join them, but Robert, sensing an opportunity to spend time with Ruth when she would be missing her usual riding partners, had declined.

"It's dismal today," she said, walking to the windows where rain continued to beat against the glass. "I wouldn't mind so much for myself, but I won't risk Sheba getting hurt. The pathways will be nothing but mud if this keeps up---"

"Robert, dear, what a pleasant surprise," Mrs. Conroy entered the room in a rustle of silk and a fragrance of gardenias. Her hair, a lighter shade of chestnut than that of her children's, was impeccably coiffed and no less grand for the strands of silver that were visible. She was dressed in a stylish white and lavender gown that allowed her matronly form to appear regal, and although it was only afternoon, she had not neglected her jewelry. "It's been awhile since we've seen you. I suppose you've been busy with the twins."

Robert kissed the cheek that was presented to him. "When they are about, yes. But now that they are in London, I have come to prevail upon your daughter for her company."

Mrs. Conroy's smile, so much like Ruth's and yet not, deepened into a crescent. "Ruth's company? Why, I'm sure that Ruth will welcome you, won't you?"

"Of course, Mother," Ruth answered briefly. "Rob is a friend."

"Yes. A very good friend," Mrs. Conroy said meaningfully as she sat down upon the sofa, waving Robert into a chair with a flowing gesture of her arm. "Come now, sit down and tell me everything that you've been doing since Oxford. Ruth, won't you sit down and join us? Caines is bringing in refreshments."

As Ruth was well aware of how Robert had been spending his time since returning home, she resented her mother's assumption that she would not have kept current with her friend's activities. Even though she knew that Mrs. Conroy could not conceive of a situation where a young man and a young woman might be friends and not be a romantic couple, Ruth's annoyance was evident. Robert recognized it and discerned the cause.

"I haven't been doing anything in particular," he said genially. "I've prevailed upon Ruth to help me, and I hope that you will consent."

"Consent? You may put the tray there, Caines. I shall pour. Robert, please help yourself to the blueberry tartlets. Blueberries have been marvelous this summer, have they not?"

"Yes, they have," Robert said, a smile hovering upon his lips as he recalled a day several weeks ago when he and Ruth had picked blueberries and gorged themselves on the sweet fruit until their lips were stained. He saw that Ruth was recalling the same episode and he was relieved to notice that her smile indicated that, at least for the moment, her ill-temper had faded. "Quite marvelous."

"Now, then, what is it that you are prevailing upon Ruth to do?"

"Go riding with me," he answered. "I'm a poor rider, you know, but I think that I could improve if I were to ride daily. I did very little riding while at Oxford, and now I'm sadly out of the habit."

"Oh . . . riding . . . well, yes, I . . ."

"I've told him that I will be glad to accompany him," Ruth told her mother, her chin raised in a familiar indication of stubbornness. "As we are friends, and Rob is practically a brother to me, there should be no need for a chaperone."

It could not be said that Mrs. Conroy was a perceptive woman. But

she was not so foolish as to lose sight of an opportunity when it presented itself. Although she quailed inwardly at the thought of her unmarried daughter riding through the village in the company of a bachelor, her pragmatic side realized the lesser of two evils: Ruth riding in the company of a young man who would like to be her husband, or Ruth holding fast to her threat to remain a spinster unless she met a man who could best her in a horse race.

“Of course not, dear,” she said in a faint voice. “No need at all.”

The Daily Rides

They agreed that Robert would meet her at the stables in the morning at eight o'clock unless it was raining or the weather was otherwise inclement. When she arrived the next morning, Robert was already there.

Ruth patted his horse. "Good old Queenie," she said. "We had many adventures with her. But she's rather past her best years, isn't she?"

"I thought it best to start out with a horse who would tolerate my lack of skill," Robert said.

"It will be a very tame ride," she said dubiously. She didn't like tame, dull rides; she preferred exhilarating gallops that left her hair mussed and her hat in jeopardy of falling from her head as the hooves of the horses beat like rapid drums against the ground, stirring up the dirt and sending clods flying up.

But to her surprise, Ruth discovered that she didn't mind a leisurely canter across the landscape, into the village and down the main street past the shops, emerging out into the countryside where the farmland was verdant and fertile, the orchards ripe, and the cattle placidly ignoring what went on outside their boundaries. It wasn't a competition, the way riding was with her brothers; she and Robert were able to talk and reminisce. As children, they had explored every inch of the town and every corner of the forest. Now, riding as adults, it was an opportunity to reminisce about those past adventures and to challenge one another to recall the details of the time they had spent with no thought but to be entertained by their imaginations and the marvelous landscape of the English countryside.

At one point, when Robert suggested that they walk their horses along a pathway that remained muddy from the rains of the previous day, Ruth agreed, pleased that, although he was not as dedicated to riding as she was, he remained mindful of the horses'

welfare.

“Remember how far we thought we had traveled when we rode this same way as children,” Robert recalled. “You were the smallest of us all and yet you were always in the lead. I used to think it was because your pony was more intrepid than ours. It wasn’t until years later that I realized that it wasn’t the pony who was out in front, it was the rider.”

Unaccountably, Ruth felt her cheeks grow pink at his words. How very silly, she thought, to become such a foolish miss because Robert had remembered one of their past escapades.

“Merry was a very brave pony,” she answered him, speaking on behalf of the beast who had been, of all her mounts, the favorite, perhaps even eclipsing Bathsheba, merely because she was so stalwart and willing. Bathsheba was certainly the more impressive of the two, but Merry had heart and an affection for the child that Ruth had been. Bathsheba could never touch that part of Ruth because she was not part of Ruth’s childhood. “When Father had to put her down, I cried for days.”

Robert remembered. Merry had broken her leg and there was, of course, no way of healing her. The entire family, even Mrs. Conroy, who was not fond of horseflesh, had felt as though they were in mourning for little Merry.

“I wonder if I shall ever care for a horse as I did for Merry,” Ruth pondered.

“Yes, you shall, but in a different way,” Robert answered. “It’s a matter of appreciating different things at different times in our lives.”

Ruth looked at him closely. “What do you mean?”

“I daresay it will sound silly, but do you remember Father’s dog, Blackbeard? I felt as if he were more my dog than Father’s; he followed me everywhere.”

“Of course I remember,” she said indignantly. “He was part of our pirate crew.”

They laughed at the memory. “He died while you were away at

Eton," Ruth recalled. "I conducted the funeral. I was quite determined that Blackbeard should have a proper Church of England service."

"I remember you wrote me and told me," he said. "I'm glad you were there."

"Do you miss him like I miss Merry?"

"I miss him," Robert acknowledged. "And I didn't think that I'd want another dog. But when Tollie had pups, there was one for me."

"Lucy," Ruth said.

"Lucy. Now that I'm home, we're back as we were, going on walks and strolling in the evenings. She's no threat to any of the birds or the animals, and she's content to sit at my feet when I'm sketching during the day. It may be the same for you and Sheba. She's certainly a splendid animal; she suits you."

"Don't let Mother hear you say that. You're a family favorite, you know, but she thinks me dreadful for naming my horse after a woman who was so ill-advised as to bathe in view of King David."

"But Queen Bathsheba proved to be a very good mother," Robert returned, "and she looked out for the welfare of her son. We can't always judge someone by their behavior at a certain time in their lives. People rise to their strengths, unexpected though that may be."

"You'll never convince Mother of that," Ruth said. "She thinks that Bathsheba was no better than she should be, and she's mortified that I've named my horse for her. If Mother had her way, horses would all have dull names like Brownie and Bess. I think we can ride again now; the pathway here is solid."

As they headed back to Ruth's home, she told Robert that he would be welcome to come by to dine with them any time. "You're practically a member of the family," she said. "Mother and Father would very much enjoy your company. Father would think that you could keep Mother and me from arguing, and Mother does enjoy your company."

"I'll take that as an invitation," he said. "And I'll extend the same. You know how fond Mother and Father are of all the Conroys. And Lizzie, of course, would enjoy seeing more of you."

"And hearing more about Benjamin," Ruth said with a smile. "Poor Ben. Mother is determined to marry him off to Louisa Spires. I think that's why he's fled to London. I doubt if Louisa ever ventures out of doors except to make her way to her carriage. She's quite wrong for Ben."

"He doesn't have to marry her," Robert reminded Ruth. "He's of age."

"Mother can be positively relentless."

"Has she been going on again about you marrying?"

"Not lately, but that's only because she's so frightened that I will follow through with my promise to marry the man who can beat me in a horse race that she won't bring the subject up. But it's always there, a sort of invisible presence. Father suffers from indigestion now, and he never did before. I truly think it's because of this marriage business."

They were at the stables. Grooms and stable lads passed by, leading horses out and bringing them back. Albert Conroy liked to have a well-tended stable and his servants attended to their tasks with dedication, knowing how much the master appreciated their efforts.

"If you don't announce that you'll marry the man who can beat you in a race, you know," Robert told her, "you won't ever be able to know for sure that you can win."

Ruth tossed her head. "Oh, I shall win," she declared with certainty. "But why should I be in any hurry for the race? I'm quite content with things as they are. Aren't you?"

Robert smiled. "I hope to marry one day. I'd like to have a wife and a family."

"You would?" she queried at this revelation. "What sort of girl do you want to marry?"

Robert's smile was mysterious. "Someone I love. I won't marry without it."

Will There Ever Be a Race?

Whether or not Ruth's suspicions that her brother Benjamin's zeal for a sojourn in London was due to his mother's intention to see him wed to the lamentable Louisa Spires could not be determined. But it was true that the twins—because of course where one went, the other was at his side—prolonged their stay in London and when summer came to an end, they wrote that they were going hunting in Scotland with a friend and would not return for at least another month.

The separation would have been almost unbearable for Ruth if not for the fact that Robert was assiduous in his visits. He accepted her invitation to dine with the family, a circumstance which brought great joy to Mrs. Conroy and great relief to Mr. Conroy, who found that he was able to have second helpings of Cook's richest desserts on the nights when Robert joined them at the dining table. Mrs. Conroy had feared that the daily rides with Robert would bring scandal to her daughter's reputation, but such had not been the case.

"Do you think it's because people do see them as sister and brother?" she asked later that night, as she was brushing out her hair while Mr. Conroy went back and forth from the bedroom to his dressing room.

"Eh?"

"Robert and Ruth. No one has mentioned anything to me about them riding together."

"Why should anyone say anything?" he asked. He was yearning for one last cigar for the night, but he knew that if he cut his wife short while she was exploring a thought, she would be irate. It was not possible to smoke in the bedroom, he would have to go to his study, but he couldn't do so until Sophie had finished what she was going on about.

"Really, Albert, they are not brother and sister, you know."

"I'm well aware of that, I don't know what you're talking about."

Men were so irritating, Sophie Conroy thought to herself as she pulled the brush through her long hair. Ruth had her hair, and her eyes and coloring. All the children did. It was a pity that they did not have her refinement and her decorum, she thought acidly as Albert, resigned to delaying his cigar, sat down in the chair opposite the dressing table so that he could respond to his wife's reflection in the mirror.

"I have hopes, you know," she said.

"Hopes of what?"

"I have hopes that Robert will ask for Ruth's hand in marriage, of course."

"Oh. Well, he may do. He's a good lad, I've always liked him and it would be like having another son. Has he said anything?"

"No," Mrs. Conroy said, striving to be patient. "But I do not think he would spend so much time in Ruth's company if he did not have feelings for her."

"He might just be doing it because he knows she's missing the boys. I never thought they'd be gone so long," Mr. Conroy said. "I hope they come home soon; they'll miss the hunting here."

Always hunting and shooting and riding, Sophie Conroy thought, closing her eyes. Men had no thought for the future; the burden of the family was always on women.

"I don't believe he is merely relieving her loneliness," his wife said frigidly. "I think he cares for her."

"Of course he does," answered Albert Conroy, puzzled at his wife's stating of the obvious. "Doesn't mean he'll marry her though. There's that challenge of hers. She said she won't marry a man who can't beat her in a horse race, and fond as I am of Rob, he's no rider."

That ridiculous challenge. It haunted her thoughts. One could hardly advertise one's daughter as the matrimonial prize in a horse

race. One couldn't even admit that such an ultimatum had even been proposed. Ruth's penchant for such quirks was well known to her family but to the villagers and the best families of the county, she was regarded as a unique girl of rather unfathomable predilections. Fortunately, she was pretty; Mrs. Conroy did not know how she would have handled matters if she were the mother of a homely girl. People were so unkind in their speculations.

"Perhaps Ruth will fall in love with him," Mrs. Conroy said, "and forget about that ridiculous challenge."

Her husband guffawed. "Not likely. Ruthie doesn't go back on something like that. She'll race, don't you doubt it. Wouldn't surprise me to see her line them all up in a row and race them all at once and give ribbons to the ones who came the closest to beating her."

He failed to detect the murderous expression in his wife's brown eyes. "As there have been no offers to race," she said icily, "I do not foresee a line of suitors mounted up to ride. I don't see anyone at all. If something does not change, you will simply have to make it clear to your daughter that she cannot continue to evade her responsibilities in this fashion. She must marry. She is twenty years old and other girls her age are already mothers."

"A bit soon for that, don't you think?" Albert suggested. "Women who marry too soon and get started on a family lose their charm. They become tiresome."

"I was eighteen when the twins were born," his wife reminded him, her words leaving her lips like frozen bricks.

"So you were," Albert said heartily, "so you were. I'd forgotten. You've kept your youth, m'dear, kept it well. I'll be going down to my study for a smoke. You go ahead and get your rest. I'll sleep in my bedroom tonight."

Sophie Conroy, having finished the brushing of her hair, retired to her bed and doused the lamp. She would have been pleased to know that, not very far away, Robert Holloway was still awake, ruminating on the very matter that she had endeavored to discuss with her husband.

Robert put down the book that he was reading and went to the window. Opening it, he breathed in the fresh air of the night. Autumn was wending its way into the countryside. He could smell the aroma of the leaves as they began to turn color. The soil, delivering up the last of its bounty, bore the deep, rich odor of its fertility. The air, still warm during the day, brought a cooling to the nighttime so that one thought with fondness of the fires that would soon be lit. There would be cider for drinking as the limbs of the trees in the orchard hung heavy with their fruit.

He had spent the summer with Ruth and it was a time to treasure. But even though he rode daily, he knew that he could not beat her in a race. She was by far the superior rider. If he wished to achieve his aim of winning her for his wife, he had to be able to do so in the manner that she had decided upon. It was unusual, it was unheard of, but it was what Ruth wanted. To win her, he had to defeat her in a field in which she excelled and he did not.

From his window, when it was daylight, he could see the houses in the valley below. Now that night had fallen, wrapping the valley in the soft dark cloak of the late hour, he could not see the Conroy house, but he knew where it was. It had been a habit of his, returning home after a day spent with his friends, to go to his window and find their house so that he could think back on the pleasure of the hours that had passed. He had always been friends with the Conroy twins, but he could not recall a time when Ruth Conroy had not come first in his heart. When he'd gone away to Eton, and later to Oxford, he had thought of her constantly, fearing that he would learn from her brothers that she had accepted a proposal from a local youth or that she was being courted by some gallant. The brothers, unaware of the agony of the separation, had continued to speak of Ruth as they always had; of her skill at riding, her marksmanship, her affection for the outdoors. It was not until he returned home that he realized that they had not kept news from him. Ruth had no suitors because she sought none.

Now it was up to him to honor the challenge she had set. He intended, as he had told her, to marry for love. What he had not told her was that she was the woman he loved.

The Riding Lessons

"I want your honest opinion," Robert said to Ruth as they returned from their morning ride on a bright and sunny day in early October.

Ruth stared. The thought of ever giving an opinion that was anything less than honest would not have occurred to her; Sophie Conroy felt that the cross she was cursed to bear was the one borne of Ruth's infallible candor. "Of course," she said.

"How would you rate me as a rider?"

Ruth was not expecting such a query. She enjoyed the morning rides with Robert for the companionship that existed between them. While it was true that she missed the energetic gallops that she and her brothers had enjoyed, she would have been disappointed had she not had the pleasure of Robert's company at her side as their horses sauntered across the countryside.

"I . . . haven't given it any thought."

"That sounds like an evasion, and the Ruth Conroy that I know does not evade the truth," he told her firmly.

"Very well," she said. "You should relax in the saddle more. It may be indelicate to refer to your legs, and Mother would howl if she heard me, but you ought not to clench Queenie's sides so tightly. Another horse less accustomed to your manner would think you were urging her to move forward. You need to sit straight in the saddle and not slouch. It's all very well to be at ease, but it's a burden on Queenie and will affect her balance. It will affect yours as well; Queenie only knows one pace, so there's no danger, but if you ride another horse, you will find that you are misleading it. Your use of the reins is very lax and is likely to confuse a horse who does not know you as well as Queenie does. You must know when to pull on them and when to let them slide through your fingers. If you wish to ride faster, you must shorten the reins to signal your

horse.”

She stopped, fearing that she had been too critical. Her mother had told her that a woman must never criticize a man. That was nonsense, of course, but Rob was a friend and she didn’t want to be unkind.

“Can you teach me?” he asked.

“Teach you?” Ruth repeated. How did one teach riding? She had always known how to ride, it seemed, from the moment she was put in a saddle.

“I wish to improve,” he said simply, “and you can see how foolish I would feel, a grown man, asking for riding lessons from an instructor. But if you would consent to teach me how to amend what you have just described, I should be able to better my riding.”

“Does it matter so much?” she asked. Rob had never been a good rider, but it had never deterred them from enjoying his company. An adventure would not have been the same had Rob not been with them.

“It matters to me,” he said simply.

“Very well,” she said. “I will teach you.”

“Let’s tell no one,” he requested. “Not even the twins.”

Ruth nodded. For reasons that weren’t entirely clear to her, she had no wish to tell her brothers that Rob had asked her to help him improve his riding skills.

It was a riddle, she thought later that evening as she prepared to dress for supper. She and Rob had been friends since they were children, and their friendship had grown deeper over the course of the summer. They were the same people they had always been. Yet, there were nuances that had not been there before.

She looked at herself in the mirror. She was wearing one of the new dresses that her mother had ordered when Ruth had gotten her new riding habit. The dress was a pale shade of yellow, not a color that Ruth favored. But her mother had insisted. “It will suit your hair,” she had said. Not caring, because Ruth didn’t particularly care what she wore, Ruth had shrugged assent.

As she studied her reflection, Ruth realized that her mother had been right. The pale yellow gave her hair a burnished hue that made it appear as if the sun were setting upon her chestnut tresses. Her brown eyes were deeper and richer in hue and the dark frame of her eyelashes encircled them with an unfamiliar mystery. She was the same Ruth Conroy that she had been yesterday, but why did she feel different tonight?

As she left her bedroom to descend the staircase, she wondered if she would look different to Rob, who was joining them for supper tonight, as he did at least once a week.

Robert was standing inside the door, giving his coat and hat to Caines. He looked up as she came down the staircase and for a brief instant, there was an expression on his face that was entirely unfamiliar to her, but pleasantly so. He said nothing at first, and then, when he approached her, he spoke.

"For an instant, I thought you were the incarnation of a delectable lemon curd coming my way, and I was swept away. You know how fond I am of lemons," he said, his gaze sweeping over her.

Ruth laughed. Rob could always be counted on to ease her uncertainty, and he had done so tonight, complimenting her without discomfiting her.

"I apologize; that's not very gentlemanly of me, is it," he said, laughing. "I should have compared you to a summer flower, or a ray of the sun."

"Had you done so, I would have laughed in your face."

"Quite right. And as you have said nothing at all about my new waistcoat, I take back my lemon praise."

"Is it a new waistcoat? I hadn't noticed."

Robert turned around slowly. "There, now you may admire it fully and I'll extend your compliments to my tailor."

"But I haven't complimented it at all," she protested, laughing at him.

"I'll extend the compliment anyway. Poor chap, I'm a great disappointment to him."

Ruth beamed. "As am I to my dressmaker."

Robert offered his arm. "Then let's enter the dining room together, two sartorial disappointments to their clothiers."

The meal was a cheerful repast. Robert seemed to be in especially good spirits, teasing Ruth and Mrs. Conroy alike, soliciting Mr. Conroy's views on the situation in France, and maintaining a threading of conversation that included everyone, no matter the topic. Mrs. Conroy was so pleased that she even tolerated the discussion of Napoleon, saying that she had heard that his sisters were very unladylike in their conduct, and that she had heard that they dampened their dresses before making an appearance, the better to . . .

Here her voice trailed off. "It's most unseemly," she said, "but just what one would expect of the French."

"I believe the Bonapartes are Corsican," Robert said with twinkling eyes. "But the observation stands."

"Mother!" Ruth exclaimed in feigned outrage. "I can hardly countenance that you of all people would introduce so base a subject into dining conversation."

"Eh, she's got you there, Sophie," Mr. Conroy chuckled. "Very risqué of you."

Mrs. Conroy tossed her head. "Oh, we're all family here," she scoffed. "It's not as if we have to be on our very best behavior." Then she recalled herself, and her intentions for the visitor. "Oh, Robert, I didn't mean that you are one of the family. Of course you are not, but as a guest, I meant that we are so fond of you that it's as if you are one of us."

Robert smiled. "I appreciate the compliment and return it."

"Of course Robbie is one of us," Ruth argued. "He's practically one of the family. It feels quite as if Benjamin and Daniel are here with us when Robbie is here."

"Speaking of Benjamin and Daniel," Robert said, "when are the wayfarers returning home?"

"From the sounds of things, not for another month. I only hope they

don't run into foul weather in Scotland and have to delay their return."

"They should have been home weeks ago," fretted their mother. "They've upset all my plans."

Mr. Conroy was about to say that his wife should have known better than to plot marriage for her sons without their complicity or consent, but, wary of what the topic of matrimony might do to the present conversation, he contented himself with saying that they were going to miss good hunting at home if they delayed too long.

He, along with his wife, were mystified when the dessert was served and Robert and Ruth simultaneously burst into laughter. That amusement was only intensified when Mrs. Conroy said crossly, "I don't see anything funny about lemon curd, it's one of your father's favorites and Cook makes it just for him."

She exchanged an exasperated look with her husband, who was as mystified as she was, but less annoyed. It was pleasant to have laughter at the dining table rather than rancor for a change.

The Challenge

When Robert showed up on Queenie for the first of his riding lessons, Ruth was adamant. “No,” she said firmly. “Absolutely not! Queenie is a darling but she’s much too soft on you. She lets you do whatever you wish and makes no effort to force you to pay attention. The two of you are like a long-married couple, entirely tolerant of each other’s faults. Johnson, saddle up Lucifer for Mr. Holloway, please. It’s time he learned to ride a horse with spirit.”

“Lucifer!” Robert said in dismay. “Are you intending to see me killed? For one thing, he’s a devil by name and nature. For another, he’s Daniel’s horse and Daniel won’t allow anyone but Benjamin and you to ride him.”

“Lucifer is spirited, but well trained,” Ruth said as Johnson brought out the black stallion who was tossing his mane in anticipation of a ride. “Second, Daniel isn’t here and won’t know that you’ve ridden him. Johnson won’t tell, will you?”

“No ma’am. He’s in fine fettle, looking forward to a good gallop. He didn’t get out yesterday and he’ll want a good workout.”

“Perfect for our purpose,” Ruth said confidently.

As Robert mounted the immense horse, he wondered if he had perhaps been precipitate in his request for riding lessons from Ruth who, because she was so instinctive an equestrienne, might not realize that for those less talented, riding was not something which was without peril.

“Now, Rob, remember what I said. You’re already starting to clench your legs into Lucifer and if he thinks you want to advance, he’ll be more than happy to do so, but perhaps at a speed that you are not ready for. You must let your legs relax. No, no, not like that. Really relax. As if they’re hanging free, but of course they’re not. That’s better.”

Johnson helped her to mount Bathsheba. “Now, we’re ready,” she said.

“If I should fall, and incur some ruinous injury which leads to my death,” Robert warned as their horses began to trot out of the stable yard, “I want you to know that, with my last breath, I intend to tell your mother that you made reference to a gentleman’s limbs.”

Ruth laughed. “Men have legs, whether Mother wishes to acknowledge it or not. And now that you’ve gotten a decent seat in the saddle, let’s give our horses a bit of fun, shall we?”

The horses may have regarded the experience as fun, but Robert was not so sure that he had the same view of the matter. When Ruth pulled Bathsheba to a stop at the top of a hill overlooking the apple orchards in the distance, Robert was only too happy to rein in Lucifer as well.

“Robert!” Ruth scolded. “Your entire face is locked up. You look as if you’re going to your doom. Riding is supposed to be pleasant exercise, not torture. Now, you must let your face relax.”

“I think I should feel very relaxed if we decided to walk the rest of the way.”

“It’s three more miles to the orchard, and then ten miles back,” she replied. “A very fine walk on a crisp autumn day, but we’ve promised the horses a ride and we must keep to it.”

“You may have promised them, but I don’t recall making any vows to a four-legged beast named for the Prince of Darkness.”

“You’re actually doing very well on Lucifer,” Ruth told him. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be able to stay on him.”

“And you let me ride him anyway? You do intend to kill me.”

“Not at all,” she laughed. “But if you can manage a beast such as Lucifer, you’re a better rider than you think. It’s better to know right from the start.”

When the ride finished and they returned to the Conroy stable, Ruth pronounced the ride to have been exhilarating. However much he may have disputed her choice of adjectives, Robert could not disagree with the effects of the gallop upon her. Her eyes gleamed

like bright brown gems and her face, alive with color and not the pale, pallid white of a London belle, was suffused with pleasure. She was the most beautiful woman he knew. Even her hair, loosened from her riding cap because of the energetic gallop, was lovelier in dishevelment than he'd ever seen it when styled for a formal occasion.

He left the stable in high spirits, buoyed by the image of Ruth's face and the relief that, demanding though the ride had been, he had at least managed to stay on the beast's back. That was something.

In the weeks that followed, he stuck to his intentions and Ruth was pleased to accommodate him. They went riding every morning unless the weather was unsuitable for the horses. She praised his prowess and Robert knew that she was telling the truth. It was not in Ruth's nature to flatter.

Winter was coming. The skies took on the sober cast of the season. No snow had fallen yet, but both Robert and Ruth knew that it would soon come and with it, mornings to ride would be fewer. Benjamin and Daniel were expected home the first week in December and Mrs. Conroy was already in a tizzy, fretting that they would be marooned in Scotland for the holidays if the northern weather should prove difficult.

Both Ruth and Robert, as if they felt the gloom of winter descending, were silent as they began their ride. But after a short distance, Robert reined in Lucifer.

"What's the matter?" Ruth asked.

"I don't know how many more mornings we'll be able to ride like this," he said.

"Oh, don't let's stop yet," Ruth begged. "I've enjoyed these mornings so much!"

Robert scanned her features. Did her words indicate that there was more than riding to her enjoyment? He saw nothing to indicate this in her expression.

"Let's race," he suggested. "From here through the village, past the fields, to the apple orchard."

“Race?” she repeated, puzzled. Robert had never given any indication that he was interested in riding his horse as fast as Lucifer would go. “Why?”

“Do you remember what you said in early summer? You said that you would only marry a man who could beat you in a horse race.”

His eyes were intent upon her. She remembered telling Robert once that his eyes were the color of cider. They were that shade of amber now as they held her gaze.

“Yes,” she replied. “I remember, but . . .”

“Will you keep that promise?” he pressed her.

“I always keep my word,” she replied. “But I don’t understand why you want to race.”

“Don’t you? If I win, you’ll understand.”

She noticed that he sat in the saddle with confidence, his posture straight, his bearing relaxed. Lucifer knew his master and would obey him.

“Very well,” she said, still not quite sure what was happening. “Then we’ll race.”

Knowing When to Lose

They set off, Robert focused and resolved, Ruth distracted and confused, her thoughts in a swirl as she struggled to put them in some kind of order so that she could concentrate on the race. It was fortunate that she was a natural rider, and that Sheba was attuned to her movements, because try as she might, Ruth could not clear her head of the uncertainty clouding her thinking.

What on earth were Robert's intentions, she pondered as Bathsheba galloped over the terrain, reveling in the freedom that Ruth offered her and the speed that she could summon. On her right, Ruth could see Robert urging Lucifer forward. The massive black stallion, only too pleased to be given his head, was surging forward.

Robert was keeping up with her. That was astounding. They'd both have to slow down when they reached the village; there would be people in the streets. That would cost both of them time.

If she wanted to win, she'd better marshal her thoughts and do so, Ruth realized. She had grown so accustomed to the morning rides that she had quite forgotten that ultimatum she had delivered to her mother, warning that she would never marry unless a man could beat her in a horse race. How long ago that seemed, and how funny that Rob would be the one to remember it. Of all the conversations they'd had, she could barely remember him referring to her declaration. What on earth had made him retain it?

Having Rob for the summer had been like returning to the days of their childhood, but with a deeper pleasure, even though the delights of childhood had been deep indeed. Ruth, even as she was leaning forward in her saddle to encourage Sheba to go faster, smiled as she recalled Rob's determination to teach her fencing the summer that they had all decided to be pirates. It didn't matter that she was a girl, Ruth recalled. She was a pirate and she must learn to fence. And so she had learned.

Rob had always been that way, she realized. It never mattered that she was a girl. She was Ruth and like Robert, she would rather be out of doors than inside. They both, in their different ways, appreciated the natural world for its beauty and its hidden charms. While the other young people of their acquaintance were dancing at balls and flirting with one another, she and Rob had spent the summer in the manner they preferred.

She saw Rob, slightly ahead of her now, galloping past the wheat fields as if the stalks themselves were in pursuit of him. She applied herself to her race; this was no time to lollygag, she had a race to win.

Or did she? Of course she did. No one could beat her in a race. Sheba, sensing her mistress' urgency, picked up her pace. The mare picked her way with dainty speed through the streets of the village, the passers-by staring at first Ruth, and then Robert, galloped by.

She was even with Robert now. It wouldn't take much to pass him; she knew she could do it. She was the superior rider, even though he had improved significantly once he'd taken her instructions to heart and applied himself to the task of improving himself.

She couldn't let him beat her. What would her brothers say? Horse racing in the Conroy household was a serious matter and her pre-eminence in the saddle was a matter of pride. Rob had always found the competition between the siblings amusing. He had never tried to best her in any of their activities together. They had always worked together; whether it was playing pirates or the court at Camelot, fishing or shooting, it was always as equals. Even when he taught her to fence, it was so that she could learn to do it well, not so that he could be superior to her. That had never mattered to him.

If she beat him, she would maintain her supremacy. But what did that matter when Rob was a man who saw a woman as an equal, not a subordinate?

She could feel the waiting strength in Sheba that would burst out in speed, bringing her to the apple orchard first. Rob glanced over at her; she could have told him that it was a mistake to look at the opponent in a race. It cost seconds that could not be regained.

The apple orchard. How many days had they spent there, eating

apples, climbing trees, and playing? Summers beyond count once the boys were off to school. Now they were all adults and school was done with. The apple orchard awaited, and with it, a decision.

Sheba was surprised to feel the pull on the reins telling her to slow down. It was not like her mistress to seek anything but a breakneck pace that brought her in first before anyone else. But as Ruth held back, she saw Rob pass her by. He gave her a startled look and for an instant, she thought he was going to stop.

But he didn't. He hurtled forward on Lucifer with all the urgency in his body and she saw him reach the orchard first. Then he dismounted and, tying Lucifer to a branch so that he could rest, Robert began walking toward her.

"You didn't want to win," he said evenly. "Why not?"

How to answer that question? She was Ruth Conroy, not a debutante, and the words were not part of her lexicon. "I don't know."

He helped her dismount from Sheba; together they walked to the orchard.

"Did you want me to win?"

"I think so."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Ruth," Robert said, his tone managing to maintain patience, "I need your answer. You know what this means."

"Yes."

"It means that you'll marry me."

"Yes."

"Ruth—do you want to marry me?" he asked, torn between tolerance and anxiety as he waited for an answer that meant everything.

Ruth flung her arms around him. "Oh, yes!" she said, her lips

finding his and then, as their love overcame her uncertainty, they were knotted in an embrace that said what words could not.

When he finally let her go, he observed what a good thing it was that Mrs. Conroy was accustomed to seeing her daughter return home from a ride with her hair tousled and her cheeks pink. No horse could take the credit, but Mrs. Conroy didn't need to know that.

"Shall we go back and tell them?" Robert asked as they mounted their horses and turned back.

"I'm not sure what we'll tell them," Ruth admitted.

"We're getting married over Christmas' will do very nicely," he answered without a pause. "Benjamin and Daniel will simply have to leave Scotland, I don't care how good the hunting is."

But to their surprise, when they entered the house, Benjamin and Daniel were already there, having left Scotland earlier than expected so that they would be home for Christmas, as Mrs. Conroy had hoped.

"Excellent," Robert said "Then you'll be here for the wedding. It's unc customary for a bridegroom to have dual groomsmen, but under the circumstances, why should we be conventional?"

"What are you talking about?" Daniel asked, staring at Robert as if he were a stranger.

"Ruth and I have been doing a great deal of riding while you two were away, and we've decided that we ride so well together that we might as well do everything together," Robert went on. "Neither of us likes a lot of fuss, so we've decided on a Christmas wedding."

Mrs. Conroy was about to protest that a Christmas wedding wasn't nearly enough time to plan the wedding of her only daughter, but her husband pressed his foot upon hers, warning her to be quiet. "That's splendid news!" he rejoiced. "So, Ruthie, you gave up the notion of finding a husband in a horse race, did you?"

"No," Ruth answered, suddenly shy at all the attention and eyes focused upon her. "Rob won the race."

"He never did!" Benjamin refuted.

“There’s no one can beat our Ruth in a race!” Daniel echoed.

“Ruth taught me how to ride so that I could race,” Robert said. “There’s no one who can ride like she can.” His look of admiration told Ruth that her hopes were answered in him. She was marrying a man who cherished her ability to make captives walk the plank and lead the quest to find the Holy Grail. Theirs would not be, Mr. Conroy observed as Caines opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate, a conventional marriage. But they would find a rare happiness, he was sure, in the unconventional.

The pirate days of childhood were gone with their youth. But they had found their treasure.

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* * *

Helen's Hand

Clean Regency Romance

Helen Collins, the Beauty without Peer

Helen Collins turned her head to one side and then the other as she studied her reflection in Madame Devereaux's cheval glass. Standing off to the side so as not to intrude upon the reflection gazing back at them, the seamstress bit her lip as she awaited Miss Collins' verdict.

The dress, sewn with intricate stitching to avoid marring the rush of pale blue silk panels that looked like an ocean wave spilling from the pearl-encrusted bodice, showed to advantage Helen's décolletage, the elegant column of her slender neck and her smooth white arms.

Helen turned her head, peering peripherally at the profile that gave her head a regal tilt.

"Very elegant, Miss Collins," Madame said approvingly. "There is not another such dress in all of Europe, and no one in all of England—in fact, dare I say it, in all of Europe--could wear it with more style."

Helen frowned. The seamstress held her breath. Madame leaned forward, her sharp eyes ready to pounce upon the slightest error that had inspired Miss Collins' disapproval.

"I'm not quite sure if it's the right color for me," she said. "It's a very pale blue."

"But, Mademoiselle, it is precisely the color of your lovely eyes, which, if you will permit me to say so, are as unique as the dress. Such a shade of blue gives just a hint of frost, but in the right company, hmmm, the ice will melt, will it not?" Madame said artfully.

Helen continued to turn her head from side to side. She enjoyed the

impression that the dress created. She looked inaccessible. For a nineteen-year old whose presence in the village social swirl had turned the marriage mill into a tizzy, the thought of being disdainful rather than accommodating was quite appealing.

“Mama?” Helen asked finally.

Her mother, who sometimes wondered how she had brought such an exquisite beauty into the world of ordinary mortals, beamed. “We must have you painted in that dress,” she said. “We’ll hang it in the foyer so that it will be the first thing visitors see when they come to call.”

Madame visibly relaxed. The seamstress breathed again.

“Very well,” Helen decided. “If you are quite sure that it becomes me, I’ll take it. You may box it up and deliver it to our house. I shall wear it to Lady Granger’s ball.”

“Mademoiselle will put all the other ladies to shame,” Madame predicted.

Helen smiled brilliantly. “That is exactly my intention!” she agreed.

When the Collins duo had left the shop, Madame leaned against the counter, her perfect posture abandoned as she sought the respite of the reprieve that they had received.

“It is well,” she said darkly, “that the Collins family pays their debts promptly. Nonetheless, I cannot but hope that perhaps Miss Collins will enchant a London swell who will take her to the city so that she can give Bond Street the same terror that she provides us when she enters our doors.”

Unaware that the obliging merchants were anything other than enraptured by her charm, Helen and her mother returned to their carriage.

“Where next, my love?” Mrs. Collins asked. “Shall we go calling? We owe Constance Featherly a call.”

Helen frowned. “I vow, Mama, the Featherlys are quite tiresome. Mrs. Featherly is forever droning on about her good works and asking me to join her and Elizabeth when they visit the poor. ‘Tis a wonder that Elizabeth hasn’t come down with a dreadful ague. Do

you know, at the Langton's supper last week, I heard her going into great detail explaining the crop rotation that her father's steward is employing to improve the harvest. Can you fancy any gentlemen concerning himself with such a matter? 'Tis no wonder that she has so few suitors."

"Now, my dear, you must be kind to girls like Elizabeth. They have not your gifts and must make do with what they can find. If not the Featherlys, then where shall we go?"

"Did you mean what you said at Madame Devereaux's shop? About commissioning an artist to paint my portrait?"

"Of course, my pet."

"Does Papa agree?"

"He will," Mrs. Collins said.

The two smiled in a conspiratorial fashion. Mr. Collins had found that it was easier to acquiesce to his wife's suggestions than to obstruct them. He and his wife were the proud parents of five children: the eldest, Henry, had attended Harrow and Cambridge and was pursuing a successful career in the diplomatic corps; the eldest daughter, Lydia, had married a baronet and had joined him at his posting in India; the second son, Lawrence, had obtained a commission in the army; the second daughter, Deborah, had married a wealthy widower and was expecting her first child before the end of the year. And then there was Helen. Her sisters were beautiful, her brothers handsome; Helen was stunning. She was fair-haired and blue-eyed, but it was insufficient to describe her looks by color alone. The more poetic of her swains preferred to compare her beauty to that of Venus; her eyes were priceless gems; her hair was spun gold; she was a goddess. Helen was quite fond of the poems written in her honor and maintained a book in which each hand-written ode was preserved.

Mr. Collins had no patience for poets but he appreciated the accolades that came his way because he had fathered a beautiful daughter. He was content as long as he was not obliged to listen to the rhymes penned in her honor.

Helen nodded. Yes, Papa would agree to have her portrait painted.

No doubt it would comfort him after she was married and had left for her husband's home. "We can talk to him about it tonight," she suggested.

"Silly girl, have you forgotten? We're having guests for supper. That nice young man, Jack Crawford accepted our invitation. You know, my dear, I think he has feelings for you." Her mother emphasized the word "feelings" so that Helen would understand her meaning. "I would not be at all surprised if he asked to court you."

"Jack Crawford?" Helen repeated the name as if it conjured up something unpleasant. "Mama, really! Surely you don't expect me to settle for someone so lacking in possibilities. He's very ordinary, you know."

Mrs. Collins considered this evaluation. "I believe he's well regarded in the county, Helen. He's quite handsome, don't you think?"

"Mama, he has no panache!"

"Panache?" her mother repeated dubiously. "Whatever do you mean?"

"He's dull, Mama. So responsible and so ordinary."

"I believe he will prosper, though, when he joins his uncle's firm," Mrs. Collins returned. "He's studying law and will have a very respectable position when he's established. There's much to be said for a secure income."

Helen did not wish to hear the conversation continued. Jack Crawford was attractive enough if one were willing to settle for a run-of-the-mill future, married to a solicitor who drew up wills and conducted legal matters for the community. But Helen dreamed of someone with brooding good looks and a reckless air, a man who had a secret or two in his past, possibly a scandal or two, but who, when he met her, would be so transformed by her love that he would live only to please her. He would need to be quite wealthy, of course, as they would travel frequently. He would have a title. His family would adore her. It was all very plain to Helen that a man like Jack Crawford could not possibly measure up to her expectations of a husband and she intended to make certain that

her mother's matrimonial inclinations removed him from any list of potential suitors. The supper that night would serve her purposes.

When she entered the dining room, intentionally late, she immediately noticed the look on Jack Crawford's face. He swiftly turned at the sound of the doors opening as if he had been waiting for her to enter. Helen nearly frowned at his obvious infatuation, but she quickly composed herself. Frowns led to wrinkles and Helen intended to maintain her smooth, unlined countenance well into old age.

"I'm so sorry for my tardiness," she apologized. "I simply couldn't decide whether to wear the diamonds or the pearls and I spent entirely too much time debating the matter."

Her father beamed. "Either would have been becoming, pet, but it looks as though you decided for the opals."

"I've heard that opals bring bad luck," said Devonian Lacey.

This time the frown did not disappear so quickly. Devonian Lacey was tolerated because her mother was a relative of royalty, although so far removed that it scarcely seemed worth the effort to endure her. She was invited to everything and was allowed to say whatever she chose, merely because she sometimes welcomed people to join her during the Season at her family's London home in Mayfair.

"I have never found them so," Helen said frigidly. "Although 'tis true that they are not suited for everyone."

"They are most becoming to you, Miss Collins," Jack Crawford said earnestly.

"Thank you, Mr. Crawford," Helen said, her tone still glacial. "Papa bought them for me, and I assure you that they have been nothing but lucky for me since that day. Do you intend to buy opals for your daughter when you are a father?"

Jack Crawford colored. "I am so far from that happy occasion that I can scarce predict what I will do," he answered.

"Do you not think of the future, Mr. Crawford?"

Mr. Collins looked uneasily at his wife. He liked young Crawford,

though he had substance if not riches, and was puzzled at his daughter's tone. She did not generally discourage any of her suitors, but she seemed to be deliberately needling Jack Crawford.

"He will not buy his daughter opals," said Devonian, "because he knows they are bad luck."

"I know no such thing," Jack protested. "I merely mean that I cannot forecast a future that includes the giving of opals when I have not yet finished my training and am not yet working with my uncle."

"I should not think the drawing up of wills is likely to allow for much in the way of purchases of jewelry," Helen said airily.

The other guests, awaiting the signal to sit down to supper, examined Jack Crawford as if he had just been dunned by his creditors and had been unable to satisfy them.

This time, the color in Jack's lean face was from anger rather than embarrassment. "I trust," he said stiffly, "that I will be able to embark on an honest career which will, when I am blessed with a wife and family, allow me to provide adequately for their needs."

"You had better choose pearls," Devonian suggested, "rather than opals."

"I believe that I will allow my wife and daughter, when I have them, to choose what they prefer," Jack countered, his dark gray gaze intent upon Helen.

"Enough talk of jewels," Mrs. Collins said. "Let's sit down to supper or the servants will think we've quite forgotten about the food they've prepared."

Jack Crawford bowed to Mr. and Mrs. Collins. "My apologies, sir, and ma'am. I have just remembered a pressing engagement which prohibits my staying to supper. I beg your forgiveness and I wish you a pleasant evening." With a curt nod to Helen, Jack Crawford left the room.

Helen tossed her head as if she didn't care that Jack Crawford, by withdrawing from the engagement, had adroitly returned her insults back to her. "Come," she said, "as Mama says, it's a time for

eating and not for cross-tempered rows.”

She smiled at Gordon Lassiter, the elegant, drawling youngest son of Lady Bartlett, who, she thought, was quite likely to inherit an impressive collection of jewelry from his mother. Gordon Lassiter smiled back, taking the time to boldly admire the opals adorning Helen’s neck. They would, he thought, as he sat beside her, fetch a pretty price at the pawnbroker’s. Probably enough to pay his gambling debts. One could not pawn a lady’s jewels before the lady had consented to be one’s wife, certainly, but it was just as well to be sure of the return on a matrimonial investment.

London Meetings

Aunt Lavinia was Helen's favorite aunt, even if she was rather odd in her ways. Although she had married well and was the most fashionable of Mama's sisters, she persisted in behaving as if she were an ordinary lady in a small village. She was particularly concerned with the problems faced by London's poor, of which, she told her niece, there were many.

"Far too many, I fear," she said, holding the sugar tongs over Helen's cup of tea. "It is unpardonable for the government to believe that the poor are merely the forgotten result of our own industrial progress. They are the results of what affluence creates when it is not equally shared."

"Yes, Aunt, thank you. Two, please."

"There's nothing like a bracing cup of tea on such a damp day. I'm afraid that we're having a rather dismal spring this year. But rain won't impact your chance at a brilliant Season, my dear. I'm delighted that my sister has sent you to visit me this year, but I'm puzzled as to why she did not send you last year? Now that you are looking to marry, it seems that your first choice would have been London."

"Mama and Papa thought that I would find someone in the village, but no one appealed. After countless parties and suppers, we agreed that we were but wasting our time with only proposals from fortune-hunters and rustics to show for it. That was when Mama decided that I should come to London."

"I'm very glad you have," Lavinia Tellington-Vane said warmly. "I wish that Everard could be here but alas, he is in Russia, of all places. This business with Bonaparte is putting a great strain on our diplomatic corps. As your brother knows, now that he is in the service, although fortunately for everyone, he has not been sent to Russia."

“Surely we will defeat the French,” Helen said. “Mama says that after we have taken care of Napoleon, we will be able to travel to France again and shop.”

Mrs. Tellington-Vane smiled indulgently but her eyes were sharp. “I am afraid that the matter of the French involves much more than a return to fashionable dressmakers,” she said.

“Oh, yes, of course, but still, it’s something to look forward to.”

Mrs. Tellington-Vane rose from her chair. They were in the breakfast room, a delightful chamber which welcomed the first light of the day and was saturated with sunshine. The furniture was made of light wood; the brocade cushions on the chairs were done in pale pinks; the curtains were a deep rose; and the entire room created a relaxing atmosphere.

Her aunt went to a desk in the corner of the room. When she came back, she unfolded a map which she placed upon the table between their plates.

“Notice these countries,” she said, pointing to the outlines of European nations that were shaded in a dark hue. “They are all under the control, or allied with, Bonaparte. As you can see, he is the master of Europe. We are here,” she indicated the island of Great Britain, “and here is Portugal, and Sweden; we are free of his domination. There is Russia, to our East, also unfettered by French rule.”

Helen had never seen the geographic proof of the menace posed by the Emperor Napoleon. “There’s not much left,” she noticed.

Aunt Lavinia sat down and folded up the map. “Your uncle has almost worn this map to shreds; daily he pores over it. If we do not stop the French, I shudder to think what will become of Europe. But as you see, the matter is much more serious than access to the best French seamstresses. We have very fine dressmakers in London and tomorrow you and I will go shopping. See if you are not entirely pleased with their talents.”

Helen smiled. “That will be capital. I have so looked forward to coming to London to stay with you.”

“And I have been delightedly anticipating your visit.” Aunt Lavinia

had no children and was a most indulgent aunt. When Mama had suggested last year that Helen should have a London season, Helen had demurred, reluctant to be obliged to traipse about the city going to orphanages and workhouses in her aunt's company to bring food and clothes to the city's poor.

But the lackluster results of her search for a husband in her own county had been bracing. No one, not even the dashing Gordon Lassiter, had attracted her interest. Papa did not want his beloved daughter to marry unhappily, and as a result he had sent her to London with a very generous purse so that she could hold her own with the city belles. Helen was looking forward to the opportunities that the London setting would offer. Although Aunt Lavinia was not a member of the aristocracy, her husband's position in the government and her own connections to so many of the gentry guaranteed that Helen would take part in the most exclusive occasions that London had to offer.

"I hope that my dresses will not seem too provincial," she admitted to Aunt Lavinia.

"Nonsense, your wardrobe is exquisite. You will look lovely at Lady Ashton's ball. You are a beautiful girl, Helen, and I shall have to be quite militant to protect you from the swarm of young men who will seek to dance with you. But remember, dearest, that marriage is much more than a handsome man who dances well. My Everard stammered every time he asked me to dance; once, he even spilled punch on my frock. But he was so interesting to talk with that I didn't mind. We have been married thirty years and I can honestly say that I continue to fall in love with him on a daily basis."

Helen was somewhat embarrassed to hear her matronly aunt discuss her feelings for rotund Uncle Everard as if he were a veritable Corinthian. Of course, one could not expect a woman of Aunt Lavinia's years to understand that a girl had a right to expect passion in her romances. Interesting conversation? What on earth did that matter? What was there to talk about, after all, at a ball? One danced and flirted and collected men's hearts and explored the potential for any of one's partners to serve as a husband. It was very simple and straightforward. As she sipped her tea, Helen contemplated how odd older people were. It was as if they knew nothing at all about falling in love.

Aunt Lavinia assured Helen, as they prepared to enter the Tellington-Vane carriage, that her yellow gown with the delicately beaded sleeves and pale satin insets was not in the least provincial.

"In fact, my dear, I don't know another girl who could carry off that shade as well as you do. It's the ideal complement to your hair." She squeezed her niece's gloved hand. "You shall be quite the conquering heroine, Helen."

Helen was gratified at her aunt's words of encouragement. She did not wish to acknowledge her apprehension, but she was a trifle anxious about the evening's event. She did not doubt her beauty, she was well aware of it. But making a splash required more than good looks. One must do just the right thing, and neither too much of it nor too little. The London ton was known for its discerning and exacting standards and she intended to take care not to appear as a rustic country maid in front of the belle monde.

She was glad that her aunt's carriage was as elegant as any of the others that had pulled up to the Ashton house, and as they were helped from the carriage by a liveried footman, she noticed that the grays were perfectly matched and equal to any of the other horses.

They were announced upon entrance and Lady Ashton came over to greet them. "Lavinia, I'm so glad to see you. You know that Paul will be most eager to speak to you."

Lavinia laughed. "He does not wish to speak to me; he wants to know if I've heard anything from Everard, when he knows perfectly well that all the diplomats write of nothing but the weather and the food in their messages because they know their letters are opened and read before they leave the country."

"Surely you and your husband have some sort of code," Lady Ashton suggested. "Paul and I often talk of what we would write so that no one would know what we were really talking about."

"I'm afraid not," Lavinia said. "I have come tonight merely for entertainment and to visit with friends, and of course, to introduce my niece, Helen, to London society. Helen, this is Lady Ashton. Mercedes, this is my niece, Helen Collins."

"How charming you look, my dear, and such a lovely shade of

yellow. I could never wear it, I'm far too sallow. You are blessed to have such a perfect complexion. Your aunt and I are both on the London Ladies Compassion Board of Directors for the Assistance to the Poor; perhaps you will join us next week when we make our next trip to the orphanages."

"Perhaps," Helen smiled politely, appreciative of Lady Ashton's compliments and hopeful that accepting them did not require her to follow through on Her Ladyship's invitation.

"Lady Ashton is a wonderful help to our society," Aunt Lavinia confided as they entered the chamber where a glittering assembly of London elite were gathered. Elegant dresses in every color adorned the room as if they were a traveling decoration as the ladies wearing them moved about. "I don't know what we'd do without her."

Helen heard her aunt and responded appropriately, but her focus was on the dresses worn by the other ladies. She noted with pleasure that the simplicity of her dress simply made other girls look as if they needed artificial embellishment to be at their best. Madame Devereaux had her shop in a small village in central England, but it was plain to see that her talents were equal to anything that London's dressmakers could demonstrate.

"Helen, dear, I must leave you for a moment. I see Sallie Trelawny over in the alcove and I know that she is trying to enlist Catherine duPont's aid for our charity fete. I must go to Sallie's aid. Will you manage?"

Helen smiled. "Yes, Aunt, I'll be fine."

Aunt Lavinia had no sooner left than a young man with an engaging smile and bold dark gray eyes took her place.

"At last!" he said, "the duenna has left and the coast is marvelously clear."

Helen laughed, not at all displeased to be ambushed by a handsome man who was so generous with his compliments.

"She is my aunt and she will be back," Helen told him.

"Then I must quickly endear myself to you. May I have the next

dance? With hopes of more to come?"

"You may," Helen said, lowering her eyes demurely, the confident smile on her lips belying the shy demeanor.

The young man laughed in appreciation. "Excellent," he said approvingly. "We shall have our first dance before she even notices that you have been spirited away by a man to whom you have not been properly introduced."

"A lack of introductions allows me to assume that you are a man of upstanding propriety," Helen offered as the music started and she was swept away in the arms of an unknown young man with stylish black locks and an expertly knotted cravat that flowed over the front of his champagne-colored waistcoat.

"Ah, what an interesting fancy. What else does the absence of introductions tell you about me?"

"That you are a gentleman," she continued, "who has heeded well the instructions of his dancing master."

He laughed again, his full lips opening to reveal even white teeth in a lean jaw. "My brother and I have been stringently taught, but I venture to say that my brother would rather be sitting behind a newspaper than standing in front of an orchestra. He's a good fellow, but not at his best in engagements such as these."

"He is your elder brother?"

The young man smiled as if he guessed at her reason for asking. "My younger. He must seek his fortune while I, the elder brother, inherit the family fortune."

"How fortunate for you," she murmured.

"It would be," he smiled, "if there were a fortune. Alas, we are a family of decent breeding but not of wealth. I'm counting on my younger brother to find a way to make us all wealthy; he's very clever but unfortunately, much more interested in his studies than in a winning hand at the tables. Ahh, there they are now; what a splendid opportunity to introduce you to the Crawfords, en masse." He skillfully led her, still dancing, to the side of the room where a well-dressed man and woman stood beside a tall young man whose

black hair and slender build displayed an immediate resemblance to her dancing partner.

Helen presented her most engaging smile as her partner said, "Mother, Father, and Jack, I want you to meet a young lady whose name is unknown to me, but who is going to allow me to partner her for the next dance. "

Helen drew in her breath. Standing with the older man and woman, stiff-shouldered and unsmiling, was Jack Crawford, the man she had last seen in her family dining room when she disparaged his ability to ever provide jewels for a future wife and female offspring.

The Crawford Complication

Aunt Lavinia was amenable to accepting the invitation to lunch that Eric Crawford's parents offered. She knew the Crawfords.

"They're a very respectable family," she said. "I believe the younger son has been taken under the wing of his uncle, who is a solicitor in the city. He's very reliable and much patronized by Londoners; it's said that he knows any number of secrets, but he's absolutely trustworthy and tells no one what he knows. If the younger son is to be working with him, then he must be trustworthy, too."

"What do you know about Eric Crawford?"

Aunt Lavinia smiled patiently. "He's quite handsome," she said. "Very popular. I suspect that he will need to marry well; the Crawfords are respectable but not rich. In order to maintain the way of life of a young man about town, he will be looking for a young woman of means."

Helen knew that she was a young woman of means, the sort of wife that a man like Eric Crawford would be seeking. But it was not flattering to hear the matter described so matter-of-factly.

"He is the heir, though?"

"Oh, yes, he will inherit the house. It's a very pleasant house."

Aunt Lavinia said no more about the Crawfords. It was unreasonable, Helen knew, but she was resentful of the praise that Aunt Lavinia had lavished on Jack Crawford, who was dull and ordinary and learning to be a stolid keeper of other people's secrets, while she offered nothing more about Eric Crawford except to say that he would need to marry well. It was monstrously unfair and all the more irritating because Aunt Lavinia was invariably kind. She had said as much as she could say while maintaining her kindness.

Helen resolved to push the matter out of her mind. Aunt Lavinia

knew nothing of romance; she was past the age when her heart raced faster because of a young man's smile or the way he held her in his arms as they danced. If she had ever known such feelings with Everard, it was so long ago that she had likely forgotten.

She chose her outfit with care, not wanting to flaunt her father's wealth, but not wanting to appear as if she did not regard the invitation with appreciation. She chose a blue print muslin dress that was gathered in the middle, with long sleeves that were tight at her wrist, creating a day dress that was fashionable enough for any occasion. Her necklace was a single pearl on a golden chain, matching the pearl circlet that kept her hair contained like a crown of golden locks.

Aunt Lavinia smiled approvingly. "You look lovely, my dear. Very tasteful."

Helen wasn't at all sure that tasteful was the effect that she was aiming for. She wasn't sure that it was a flattering look. But perhaps Aunt Lavinia was correct; the Crawfords were not members of the upper class and it would not have done to show up for a simple luncheon dressed as if she wished to show off the contents of her closet.

They were greeted at the door by a maid rather than a butler. The matronly woman bobbed a curtsy as they entered, taking their outer garments before she led them into the dining room.

Mrs. Crawford ushered them to the table. "It's just a simple luncheon," she said. "Your aunt and I have known each other for a long time."

"Mrs. Crawford and I both belong to the London Orphan Society," Aunt Lavinia explained. "We'll be going on our weekly visit on Tuesday."

Helen smiled as if she were interested. She was, however, wondering where Eric Crawford was and why only his mother was present. As the ladies discussed the plight of the orphans, Helen studied the room. It was cozy rather than opulent, with no particular semblance of style. The furniture appeared to have been part of the room through generations with no attempt to modernize

the style to reflect the latest fashions popularized by the Prince Regent. If she married Eric, she realized, she would want to redecorate the house at once. It would be impossible to invite members of the ton to a residence so lacking in style.

That table, for instance; it must have been in the family for generations, judging by the knicks in the surface. If it were an heirloom, better care should have been taken—

“Eric! We’ve been waiting for you!”

Her reverie was interrupted as Mrs. Crawford spoke, greeting her son as he came into the room. His gaze immediately alighted upon Helen.

“So sorry, Mother. Jack and I were longer than we intended to be. Or rather, Jack was longer than I intended to be. Father will be coming in soon. We were on our way back from White’s when of course Jack---ah, there he comes. Well, Brother, we are late and no doubt the joint is burned, and we shall shame our table and disappoint our guest.”

“Not at all,” Helen exclaimed. Jack glowered but said nothing.

Mrs. Crawford rang for the servants to serve lunch. As was the case with the furniture, the food was hearty and tasty, but nothing that would have graced a palace table. Contrary to Eric’s prediction, the joint was not burned; it was, in fact, succulent and moist, indicating that their cook, however lacking she might have been in grand recipes, knew how to cook.

Aunt Lavinia was generous in her praise of the meal and Mrs. Crawford beamed with pride. “Mrs. Beems has been with us a very long time and she knows all of our favorites.”

“In truth, Mrs. Beems is reluctant to acknowledge that our appetites have changed since we were in the nursery,” Eric said, giving Helen a meaningful glance.

She smiled with understanding. “’Tis the same with our household staff,” she agreed. “Our head cook is forever trying to tempt me with blancmange because I clamored for it when I was still in the nursery. I fear that she’s quite a tyrant in the kitchen and our two undercooks are forever prevailing upon Mama to intervene when

they wish to try a new dish from the Continent.”

There was a pause.

“You have an abundance of cooks?” Eric said after a few moments had passed.

Conscious that she had somehow said something wrong, but quite uncertain why, Helen said, “Oh, Papa likes to entertain quite a bit and some of his associates are foreign, so he doesn’t want to present a table that seems too provincial.”

“I must confess that our cook has me thoroughly cowed,” Aunt Lavinia said when another pause weighed heavily after Helen’s words. “I simply accept what she presents to me and keep my longing for a nice roast to myself until she’s in a good humor again.”

The conversation turned to a humorous exchange of servant tyranny; Eric volunteered items about his valet and Aunt Lavinia referred to her lady’s maid’s oppressive techniques when choosing her attire for a ball. Aunt Lavinia, who had excellent taste in clothing and the means to indulge it, managed to sound as if she were a bumpkin who, if not for the intervention of her lady’s maid, would have been denied entrance by the patronesses of Almack’s.

Only Jack remained silent, his attention on his plate, his jawline tight as he chewed his food. Helen tried to ignore him, and it should have been easy to do so, as it was Eric she sought to engage in conversation, but the weight of his discontent was perceptible. She concentrated her attention on Eric who visibly thrived on the center stage, regaling her, his parents and Aunt Lavinia with his tales until Helen’s sides hurt.

When the servants brought in Shrewsbury cakes for dessert, Helen impulsively clapped her hands. “This is the best luncheon I’ve had in such a long time!” she announced.

Mrs. Crawford smiled. “You’re very sweet to say so, Miss Collins.”

“But it’s quite true. We never have Shrewsbury cakes at home and I don’t know why.”

“Perhaps they are not elegant enough for your guests,” Jack

suggested.

Helen realized that he was chiding her for her earlier words, which seemed unfair, as she had meant no insult. "Then it is their loss," she said, tossing her head. "I intend to remind Cook about Shrewsbury cakes and if you do not object, Mrs. Crawford, I should very much like your cook's recipe."

"Mrs. Beems will be flattered," Mrs. Crawford assured her.

Although Jack Crawford added no more to the dinner conversation, he joined Eric and Helen when they followed Mrs. Crawford and Aunt Lavinia into the drawing room. Aunt Lavinia and Mrs. Crawford immediately began discussing the orphanages and their work. Mr. Crawford had made his apologies and left after the dessert. Eric insisted that Helen sit on the settee, while he and his brother occupied chairs across from her. Eric proved himself again to be a diverting conversationalist as he entertained her with his account of a perfectly dreadful performance he had seen at a Drury Lane theatre just the week before.

"Perhaps you would like to join us some night at the theatre," he suggested.

"For another bad performance, or for a good one?" she asked.

"Oh, there's a rare sort of entertainment to be had from watching bad actors in a bad play," he said. "One merely wishes that they would advertise their performances so, in order for the audience to know what to expect. After all, if Lady MacBeth is washing imaginary bloodstains from her hands, one wishes to be sure that the scene is one of great drama and importance, and not an unintentional comedy."

"You make the prospect sound most engaging," Helen said. "I must ask Aunt Lavinia if we can go to the theatre so that we can enjoy one of these unique performances."

"I shall be delighted to accompany you. What do you say, Jack?" Eric inquired, bumping his elbow into his brother's arm. "Shall you join us, or do you prefer to spend your evening with your law books?"

Although he was teasing, his eyes were kind and affectionate as he

looked at his brother and it was easy to see that the bond between the two was strong. Jack managed to smile. "After the calumny that you've heaped upon the acting profession, I think that I'd do better to wait until a new round of plays opens. You are more ferocious than any critic."

"I mean well," Eric protested. "Did I not say that I was entertained by the terrible performances? I should gladly pay for such excessive wringing of hands and tearing of hair. I merely wish to know in advance that I am being subjected to such an event."

The conversation continued in the same vein, with Jack no more cordial than he had been before, although occasionally he managed a smile at one of his brother's witticisms. When Aunt Lavinia rose and made her farewell, Helen was disappointed that the afternoon was ending. Both brothers walked her out to the carriage, one on each side.

As the groom opened the carriage door to admit the ladies, Eric gallantly stepped forward to offer Aunt Lavinia his assistance. She smiled and accepted his arm. When she was inside, Eric repeated the gesture.

Helen turned to Jack. "Good afternoon," she said as she accepted Eric's proffered arm.

The younger Crawford brother remained silent. With his coal-black hair and dark gray eyes, ramrod posture and stern visage, he looked to Helen as if he had somehow been transformed into a human sword, sharp as a new blade and utterly unyielding.

Confused, Helen looked to Eric, who placed her hand on his arm as if there were nothing amiss.

"We look forward to welcoming you to our home again," Eric told her.

"I am sure that Aunt Lavinia will wish to return the invitation and offer you her hospitality," Helen said. There were twin spots of red upon her cheeks and her eyes were bright as if tears were waiting to be shed. But she kept her head high as she stepped into the carriage, bestowing upon Eric a brilliant smile as the horses pulled away from the house.

Luncheon with Jack Crawford

Even an afternoon in the London shops could not restore Helen's customary aplomb. Pleading a headache, she declined to join her aunt for supper, accepting the suggestion that she take a tray in her room and get her rest. Aunt Lavinia was inclined to credit too much excitement and too little sleep for causing the headache and Helen allowed her to believe this, but once she was in her bedroom, her tray untouched, she blew out her candle and lay in bed, her eyes open and her thoughts swirling in her head.

It did not matter if Eric Crawford's inheritance was minimal and his opportunities limited, she decided. He was charming and pleasant, quite handsome, an excellent dancer, very fashionable, well-mannered and courteous. He would get along with her parents, she had no doubt. He was certainly not a gloomy, overcast presence who was capable of making a perfectly delightful conversation feel as if it were taking place in the middle of a downpour of rain. How different the two brothers were, she marveled. Jack Crawford so dour and grim, and Eric so inviting, amiable, and hospitable.

But it was apparent that Eric was quite fond of his younger brother and if Helen were to encourage Eric's suit, she knew that she would have to find a way to come to terms with Jack if there was to be any level of family accord. But what could she do to recreate a favorable impression of herself when it was plain that Jack continued to base his knowledge of her upon the episode that had taken place a year ago at her parents' home? She was a year older and Helen was confident that she had matured in that time. She was quite ready to recognize the qualities in a husband that would engender a successful marriage. Eric Crawford would be the husband for her. That meant that she had to prove to Jack that she was different from the girl he remembered.

In order to do that, she needed to have time alone with Jack. Perhaps she could invite him to lunch, giving them the chance to

know each other better. Once he realized that she was not the way he remembered, he would be more likely to support the marriage. She knew that if she gave Eric encouragement, he would ask for permission to court her. But she was not so convinced that he would do so if his brother disclosed what she had said a year ago.

It had been foolish, she admitted to herself. She had been rude to Jack. She wished that she could take those words and that episode back, but as she could not, she must move forward. And she had to do it quickly, before the brothers had a chance to discuss her privately.

The next morning, she arose early and sent one of the footmen to the Crawford house to invite Jack to lunch. She hoped that Eric would be at his club or out riding when the invitation arrived, and that Jack would be at home; she did not wish the brothers to misunderstand her intentions.

She was relieved when the footman returned with a reply from Jack, stating that he appreciated her invitation and that he would join her for lunch.

Aunt Lavinia had left for one of her visits to another of her causes and was not at home. Helen alerted the housekeeper that she would be joined at lunch by a gentleman; there was no need, she assured her, for anything elaborate: cold meats, cheese, bread and fruit would suffice. The housekeeper seemed surprised, but whether her reaction was because Helen was playing hostess to a private engagement or because the menu was so simple, Helen did not know.

Since Jack seemed to regard her as frivolous and extravagant, Helen dressed with the intention of disarming him by her maturity. Her block-printed cotton dress was an attractive combination of green, white and gold colors that was pleasing to her complexion without embellishment; a simple heart pendant was her only jewelry. She was confident that, thus attired, she would immediately impress Jack Crawford with her sobriety and suitability as a wife for his brother.

She realized that it was quite daring to entertain Jack Crawford for lunch without a chaperone present, but he was such a sobersides

that she did not fear any unsavory revelations from the luncheon. She instructed the servants to bring in the food before he arrived; she dismissed them but gave orders that the doors of the dining room were to remain open. That, she thought, took care of the situation quite nicely.

She heard Aunt Lavinia's butler open the door when Jack Crawford arrived promptly, exchanging pleasantries with the guest as he took his coat and hat.

"Mr. Crawford," Joffrey announced.

She gave Jack Crawford her most welcoming smile. "Mr. Crawford, I do appreciate you accepting my invitation. Please, will you sit down?"

"No, I will not," he replied. "I have not come to exchange pleasantries. I have come with one purpose. You must stay away from my family, particularly my brother. My parents are good and decent people who will not be mocked because they lack the financial means to which you are accustomed. My—"

"Mr. Crawford," she interrupted. "You misunderstand me. I am fully contrite for my silliness a year ago. Can you not accept that a girl may grow up in a year's time? Will you accept my apology for the manner in which I behaved when you were a guest in my home?"

"How you behaved is of no consequence to me," he replied with asperity. "Your character has not changed. My parents would be severely wounded by your disdainful manner toward those persons who have not your financial advantages. My brother Eric longs for a less impecunious manner of living; he is not a fortune-hunter, but he could too easily be swayed by an attractive heiress who seems to offer all that he believes he wants. You are not welcome in the Crawford family."

Stung, Helen raised her voice. "You are not nearly the gentleman that your brother is. You deceive us all, sir, with your callous ways and your boorish comments. I have never been so insulted in all my life and you do me a disservice."

"I do not think so," he answered. "I assure you, I am doing you the favor of speaking with absolute candor. If my brother were to

foolishly fall under your spell, I believe that you would make his life miserable. I am not going to let that happen. You must remove yourself from his expectations.

“You have no right to order me in that manner!”

“I have every right. Have you no womanly feeling that you can understand my desire to protect the family that I love?”

“Do you think I am devoid of womanly feelings?” she retorted. “I too have parents. I have brothers and sisters. They are all dear to me.”

“Miss Collins, I doubt that you have any knowledge of how deeply rooted is the affection that I hold for my brother. You are superficial, selfish, and overindulged. You behave like a spoiled child instead of a young woman. You may cut a swath through London and break as many hearts, of as many swells as fall under your spell, but I shall not stand idly by and allow you to enchant my brother. He is far too good for the likes of you.”

Helen wanted to slap him. Only the knowledge that, if she did so, she would confirm his estimation of her as a self-indulgent and spoiled child kept her hand at her side.

“I shall not discontinue my acquaintance with your brother!” she exclaimed. “You shall not tell me what I may do and whom I may associate with. I hope that I have made myself perfectly clear.”

“Perfectly,” he said through clenched teeth. “I bid you good day, Miss Collins.”

She watched as he turned and left the room without glancing back, his posture as resolute as if he were a military officer at drill.

Helen looked at the table where the platter of meats, fresh cheeses, cut fruit, and freshly baked bread sat untouched. She had no appetite and was aware that the news of Jack Crawford’s brief stay and peremptory departure would already have been shared by the household staff. Someone would certainly disclose the circumstances to Aunt Lavinia, who would want to know what had possessed her niece to invite a gentleman to lunch without the requisite supervision.

"It doesn't matter," Helen said to herself. "I shall see Eric Crawford and I shall enjoy his company."

She went to the parlor and sat down at the desk.

Dear Mr. Crawford, she wrote, envisioning Eric's dancing dark gray eyes and merry countenance, I hope that we may have the pleasure of your company for supper some convenient evening soon. I am most eager to return the hospitality that you showed to my Aunt and me at your home. We should very much like to welcome you and your parents to our home in order to share a pleasant evening.

I hope that your mother will call again upon my aunt soon.

I remain,

Helen Collins

She sealed the letter and instructed the footman that he was to deliver it to Mr. Eric Crawford at White's; he was not to leave until he had placed it in Mr. Crawford's hand. The footman nodded obediently, not averse to an errand which afforded the opportunity to stroll out in the busy streets and divert himself with a possible flirtation with one of the maids in the neighborhood.

That would show Mr. High and Mighty Jack Crawford, Helen thought to herself as the footman departed on his mission. To think that he should accept her invitation to lunch only to warn her to cease having any further communication with his family. She had gotten on well with his brother, his mother and his father, and if they wished to have no more to do with her, well, she would have to abide by their wishes. But it was not up to the youngest son of the family to rule on their behavior. Particularly when the youngest son was such an imperious and narrow-minded, unforgiving boor.

The Picnic

Aunt Lavinia was quite willing to invite the Crawfords to dine. But when she learned that Helen had privately invited Jack Crawford to lunch with no chaperon present, her pleasant face took on a stern countenance. "Helen, my dear, you are very fortunate that Jack Crawford is a gentleman."

"He's nothing of the sort!" Helen objected. "I told you, he was rude and dismissive."

"Perhaps," Aunt Lavinia said. "But he will not abuse the trust that you have placed in him by inviting him here with no one present. You must not ever be so reckless again. Your parents sent you to London so that you will be able to make an advantageous marriage. I assure you, my dear, that if London knew the circumstances of your private luncheon, you would find it necessary to return home at once in the wake of the ensuing scandal. You are a lovely, charming girl, but you are not at all attuned to the ways of London society. There is no forgiveness for a girl who has forsaken her virtue."

"Aunt Lavinia," Helen gasped. "I have done no such thing! You said yourself that Jack Crawford is such a paragon that I was entirely safe in his company."

"Yes . . . "Aunt Lavinia agreed thoughtfully. "But had you been left alone with Eric Crawford, I should not have been able to say the same thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Eric Crawford is a man of the town. He is not wealthy or ambitious, but he belongs to a set that amuses itself with the

entertainments of gentlemen who do not quibble over niceties. Eric has not the means to maintain those sorts of diversions.” She held up her hand to halt Helen’s next statement. “Yes, he is a charming man. I was quite amused by his company at lunch. But that does not mean that I think he will be an upstanding husband. However---let me finish, my dear. It may surprise you to learn that when I was young, I was what might be described as a flighty girl. I wanted to dance with handsome men and fall in love.”

Helen was dubious that plump Aunt Lavinia, with her matronly circle of friends and her worthy causes, could possibly have been swayed by romantic feelings. And if she had been, what had made her settle on Uncle Everard, with his stout frame and the spectacles that he wore perched on the end of his nose?

As if she sensed her niece’s disbelief, Aunt Lavinia continued. “In fact, when I first was introduced to Everard, I was so transfixed by his blue eyes that I paid very little attention to what he was talking about. I recall one evening at a ball when he inquired of me what I thought of the terms of the Treaty of Paris.” She laughed merrily at the recollection. “I had no idea that any such treaty existed, but dear Everard truly valued my opinion. He didn’t think of me as a silly girl with nothing in her head but beaux and dancing. After that, I found myself intrigued by him. We began talking. No young man had ever valued my thoughts on anything before. It was dazzling. By the end of the Season, I knew that I would rather talk to Everard Tellington-Vane about the Treaty of Paris than dance the minuet with the Prince Regent.”

“Aunt, this is all very uplifting, but I do not see what it has to do with me or either of the Crawford brothers.”

“In order for you to make the right choice of a husband, I am fully prepared to allow you to be courted by Eric Crawford, if you so choose. I do not know what your mama would think of me for this, but I am ready to take the risk. Therefore, if Eric wishes to come to me to seek my permission to be a suitor, I shall grant it. But keep in mind, my dear, you may only do so if you are properly chaperoned, and I assure you that I am a most assiduous duenna. Do you agree?”

For answer, Helen flung her arms around her aunt. "Oh, Aunt Lavinia, thank you!"

As Aunt Lavinia returned her niece's embrace, she said, "Let us see if you find that the prize you seek is the prize you win."

That sounded very cryptic, but Helen was so jubilant at her aunt's willingness to allow Eric Crawford to court her that the words evaporated before her mind had time to try to answer the riddle.

Aunt Lavinia was as good as her word. She allowed Helen to accept invitations to dine, to go to the theatre, to ride with Eric in an open carriage---and she was always present, smiling and cordial, but with no ambiguity in her role as the chaperone. Eric expected nothing less, Helen realized; it was the way in which courting was done in London.

He did not actually call upon her aunt for permission to pay suit to her, but Helen supposed that, as her parents were not in London, he was not going to make a formal declaration until Mama and Papa were present to give formal approval. In the meantime, Aunt Lavinia's unflagging accompaniment was suitable.

Quite often, Mrs. Crawford joined them on excursions; she and Aunt Lavinia were always engrossed in their chatter, but not so occupied that either would have allowed any impropriety to pass unnoticed. But Eric was always just as he had been at the luncheon that first day when he had hosted her and her aunt at his home. He had an unlimited supply of amusing stories. He was always elegantly attired. His manners were flawless. There was never a lock of hair out of place in his appearance.

This was particularly apparent one Saturday when they accepted the Crawfords' invitation to go on a picnic out in the country. Aunt Lavinia and Mrs. Crawford were looking for a suitable place to take the orphans for an outing, and a comrade had proposed that they visit her cottage by the lake to determine whether it would be suitable.

Helen was anticipating the outing and was dressed in a white and pink frock with a bonnet and parasol that had been designed to perfectly match the color and fabric of her garment; she knew that pink was one of her best shades, as Madame had told her, and the dress, a light and frothy concoction, was ideal for a warm summer day in June. Of course Eric was attired as befitted a young man on a country outing, and he still managed to look as dapper as if he were heading to a private ball. Eric was properly complimentary to her and to her surprise, Jack Crawford, who against any expectation was among the party, muttered that she was looking well.

Helen thanked him coolly; she was unsure why he had joined his mother and brother for the picnic and was not at all pleased that he had done so. He had none of his brother's sartorial elegance, she observed. He was not unattractive, but it was obvious that he spared no thought for style and she doubted that his manservant, if he had one, had been given a chance to provide service with a comb. His hair was as disheveled as Eric's was coiffed. His cravat was the very simplest of neck cloths, as if he couldn't be bothered with the fuss of a fashionable knot. His trousers, shirt, and waistcoat were entirely unremarkable; she supposed that he owed no outstanding bills to his tailor.

As usual, Aunt Lavinia and Mrs. Crawford began to talk about the orphanage. Eric must have shared her thoughts because he asked, "What on earth do you find to discuss every single time you two are together? How much can possibly change in the world of an orphan?"

"You know nothing about it, Eric," his mother chided him. "They are children, so of course their lives are changing constantly."

"I should think the greatest change would be if one were to be adopted," said Jack.

It stood to reason that he would have been the one to ruin a perfectly lovely outing with dismal thoughts of fatherless and motherless children, Helen thought disgustedly. Of course she was aware that there were people far less fortunate than she, but it was

hardly sporting to bring the matter up in the company of people who were intent on having a good time.

Eric deftly changed the subject to something less somber and Helen smiled her gratitude. The rest of the drive was much more cheerful in disposition and even the ladies managed to cease talking about the orphanage. At least, until they had gotten out of the carriage and Aunt Lavinia's indispensable Locksley, who willingly set himself to whatever task was put before him, had placed a generous length of cloth on the ground and set the picnic food upon it.

Locksley tipped his hat to his mistress and set off in the wagon.

"He will remember to come and fetch us, I hope?" Eric inquired. "Where is he going?"

"I've sent him to the orphanage with lunch for the children," Aunt Lavinia said.

Jack Crawford smiled at her. "That's a splendid idea. They'll be very grateful."

When he smiled, the severity of his lean jaw and stern lips relaxed and Helen noticed that he was actually quite as handsome as his brother.

"They're always grateful," Mrs. Crawford agreed.

"How tiresome it must be," Helen said as she removed the cloth napkins covering the dishes that the kitchen staff had packed with diligent attention. "Always having to be grateful."

Aunt Lavinia remonstrated in protest, but Jack's gaze was intent, as if Helen's words, voiced before she gave proper thought to whether or not her comment was really fitting for the occasion and company, were worthy of consideration.

"I think you are quite astute, Miss Collins," he said approvingly as he joined her in uncovering the dishes. "It would be exceedingly

tiresome to forever owe thank you's to all and sundry."

"Whatever do you mean, Jack?" his mother asked him.

"Only consider, Mother, how great a store we set by our self-sufficiency. We must not be seen to be in need. Gentlemen play cards and lose, purchase clothing from their tailor with no notion of how to pay for anything, and live their lives as if they can afford it."

"I fail to see what that has to do with orphans," Eric said. He sounded a trifle cross. Helen wasn't sure why, but neither was she certain why Jack had referred to her as astute.

"We have the means to live the illusion that we have everything we need, and no reason to be dependent upon, and therefore grateful to, anyone. Orphans know from the moment they awaken in the morning until they go to sleep at night that every mouthful of food, every stitch of clothing, every item of furniture, even the beds they sleep in, is theirs because of someone's charity. One cannot always live one's life feeling beholden to others. You are quite right, Miss Collins. And now, I confess freely, that I am much beholden to you for these delicious strawberries. 'Tis gratitude freely given!"

She laughed as Jack Crawford took an appreciative bite out of one of the luscious red strawberries that the servants had picked just that morning.

"I hope you are right," said Aunt Lavinia. "Because Locksley is taking a basket to the children."

Jack smiled. "I'm sure I am right, Mrs. Tellington-Vane," he said. He smiled at Helen as if the two of them were in accord on the matter.

Another Side of Jack Crawford

"Shall we accept, then?" Aunt Lavinia asked. The invitation from Mrs. Crawford was in her hand, having arrived just that morning.

"Yes," Helen agreed immediately. "We had a delightful lunch last time and I think we shall do the same if we go again. They are a charming family."

"All of them? Even Jack?" Aunt Lavinia asked slyly as she took up a quill to accept the invitation.

"He's much less stuffy now that he's discovered how to smile," Helen said. "I don't suppose he'll ever be as fashionably dressed as his brother, but after all, there is more to a man than his wardrobe."

"Quite," said Aunt Lavinia, smiling to herself as she dipped the quill in ink.

Helen had been quite astonished to find that Jack Crawford's personality had dramatically changed after the picnic. It was nothing that she could bring up to his brother, who had not altered at all since she first met him. Eric was as unflappable as ever when she and Aunt Lavinia arrived for their luncheon invitation, even though, as they entered the dining room, they could hear Jack Crawford thundering about the fools in Parliament.

"Pay him no mind," Eric advised as the ladies were seated. "He's decided that no one in Parliament cares about the undeserving poor."

"I'm of half a mind to run for a seat myself," Jack exclaimed.

"I shouldn't bother, you haven't the means," Eric advised. "And before you rail upon the injustice of only the wealthy being able to afford to serve in government, pray remember that we are hosting guests who do not wish to hear your political screeds."

“What has Parliament done or not done?” Aunt Lavinia asked. “I must be sure to write to Everard and tell him that nothing has changed since he departed for Russia.

“Parliament has done bloody nothing, and that’s the problem!”

“Jack!” Mr. Crawford scolded. “You must remember that we are hosting ladies at our table. You must pardon my son, ladies,” Mr. Crawford said with a tolerant look at his youngest, who held his knife as if he would rather use it upon an offending member of Parliament rather than his mutton. “He has quite a temper when it comes to ideas about liberty and the like. I sometimes think he has a bit of the Jacobin in him.

“Fortunately, there are no guillotines in England that I am aware of, and so we shall all keep our heads,” Eric said humorously.

“My apologies, ladies,” Jack said, his color still high and his gray eyes blazing like charcoal that had been ignited. “I forgot myself.”

“It seems to me,” Helen said, “That, to the contrary, you remembered yourself.”

Their eyes met. Jack said nothing, which did not explain why it seemed to Helen that he had just delivered a speech without uttering a single word or why Aunt Lavinia had such a peculiar smile on her face.

“Do you really wish to stand for Parliament?” she asked Jack after he had expounded upon his political views and the servants had just brought in dessert.

“Not really,” he said. “That is, I would like to one day, but I’d better concentrate on the study of law before I decide to become involved in making it.”

“You’d do well to soften some of those wild proclamations of yours as well,” his father told him. “No one will vote for a man who regards the guillotine as a solution to the nation’s problems.”

“One can hardly blame the French people for resorting to desperate means, though, Father,” Jack argued. “Starving and destitute while the royal court frolicked and the Queen dressed up like a shepherdess? Small wonder that Napoleon looked like a welcome

change.”

“But that was no reason to cut off her head,” Helen argued. “Tisn’t as if she were a queen in anything but marriage. She shouldn’t have been blamed for the king’s failures.”

“She was certainly a contributor to the extravagance,” Jack disputed her premise.

“But to cut off her head?”

“Extreme measures, I concede, but desperate people employ desperate means. You’re only sorry for her because she was a pretty woman and as a woman yourself---“

“Yes?” she asked when he abruptly stopped talking. “You were saying?”

Jack had the grace to grin ruefully. “I was saying that I should very much like another serving of Mrs. Beem’s baked apples,” he said.

Helen returned his grin. “That’s very diplomatic of you, isn’t it, Aunt Lavinia?”

“Very,” nodded her aunt.

Eric rose from his seat. “My apologies for having to leave, but I’m engaged on another matter shortly and if I don’t leave now, I’m afraid I’ll be late. Miss Collins, a pleasure as always.”

“Good day, Mr. Crawford,” Helen said. “I look forward to seeing you again.” She was surprised that Eric Crawford had accepted another engagement when the luncheon had been previously scheduled, but perhaps something unexpected had come up in the meantime and his presence was required elsewhere.

After Eric left the room, Helen returned to the subject that had roused Jack Crawford to such ire. “You don’t really approve of the way in which the Jacobins took their revenge, do you?”

“How are you so well acquainted with the Revolution?” he wanted to know. “You’ve have been a mere child.”

“Mama had a lady’s maid who fled the Terror and she used to tell the most horrifying stories. Mama would have been irate if she’d

known. I was frightened, but I always wanted to hear more.”

Jack laughed. “That’s one way of inspiring young minds with an appreciation of history, I suppose,” he said.

“Rather a gruesome way, I should think. Is she still employed by my sister?” Aunt Lavinia wanted to know.

“No, she met a dancing instructor and they ran off. He was French,” Helen said matter-of-factly.

Aunt Lavinia laughed. “Oh, well, that explains it,” she said. “One never knows what the French will do in matters of l’amour.”

“I do hope that Napoleon will be brought to heel, however. Despite what you say, Jack, I don’t believe that you regard Bonaparte as an improvement.”

“He has introduced some very egalitarian laws,” Jack said, his eyes dancing merrily as if he knew that he were throwing fuel to the fiery topic. “But I fear that the Emperor is no more enlightened than the English when it comes to providing the fair sex with the rights to which they have been denied.”

Mrs. Crawford groaned. “Jack, I beg you, do not beat that very tired drum again. Our guests shall not be subjected to your radical notions.”

“Very well, then, Mother; it’s back to the oppressive nature of the English ruling classes.”

“Perhaps, if I may, introduce a somewhat less perilous argument?” suggested Aunt Lavinia. “I am planning a small supper party next month with just a few friends, and of course, I hope that you will all be able to join us. I’ll be sending out invitations at the end of the week. Jack, I hope that you will be able to join us with your parents, and Eric of course.”

“I can’t speak for Eric, but I shall be delighted.”

“And you shall leave your inflammatory ideas at home?” Aunt Lavinia asked.

“I shall speak of nothing more controversial than the weather,” he promised.

"That sounds very dull," Helen remarked.

"Dull is preferable to having my youngest son arrested for treason,"

Mrs. Crawford responded. "I never worry that Eric will be overcome by the passion of his opinions, but Jack more than makes up for it. But he will not be a bad guest, Lavinia, and so I may be confident that we shall bring nothing less than amity to your supper party."

Helen found herself looking forward to the prospect of another engagement with the Crawford brothers, and even the thought of Jack launching into one of his passionate denunciations of the ills of society did not cause dismay. On the contrary, she had found the conversation quite diverting.

Aunt Lavinia, however, declared that if Jack Crawford took to espousing the cause of the Jacobins at her supper party, she would not hesitate to take a vase, remove the flowers within, and empty the water on his head. The two were in the drawing room, planning the menu for the supper party which was shortly to take place. Several weeks had passed since the last meeting and, although Helen had been busily engaged in the Season's gaiety, she missed the companionable times with the Crawfords.

Helen laughed at the image her aunt's declaration conjured. "I do not think he would be at all perturbed, Aunt," she said. "Despite the fervor of his words, he is not in the least ill-humored."

"I have noticed that as well," her aunt concurred.

"He and his brother have equally temperate natures," Helen decided.

"Perhaps. It's been some days since we've had the pleasure of the Crawford brothers' company. Have you had any communication of late?"

"Eric wrote that he has been engaged with matters of business; he mentioned that his brother has been occupied as well; I believe he will be joining his uncle in his law office in the autumn while continuing his studies."

"Commendable; studying is certainly necessary but it will do no harm to acquire a bit of practical experience in the field. Perhaps

you would do an errand for me?"

"Of course, Aunt. What is it?"

"I have a list of items which the orphanage needs; I wrote it last night. Could you take it 'round to Mrs. Crawford so that she may add to it anything that I have forgotten? I shall send Whittier with you," Aunt Lavinia finished. "She is something of a dragon, as you know and there will be no risk to your reputation in her company."

Aunt Lavinia's zeal to make sure that her niece was properly chaperoned had become something of a private jest between aunt and niece and Helen was smiling as she set off with Whittier, who was not so much a dragon as she was so lugubrious that she was likely to discourage improper advances merely by the gloom of her presence. But Aunt said that no one could do hair like Whittier, and so it was worth putting up with her megrims.

As they walked, Helen wondered if Jack Crawford would be at home; surely he would be, she reasoned, since he had already accepted the invitation for the supper tonight. Eric had not responded, but no doubt he assumed that they already knew he would be attending. It would be pleasant to have the company of both brothers; Eric was always amusing, but Jack's presence provided an added fillip to Helen's anticipation of the evening. He was so ardent that he counterbalanced his brother's unflappable charm, she thought as she compared the differences between the brothers. She hoped that the other guests Aunt Lavinia had invited were not too dull or were the sort to take Jack's jesting remarks too much to heart.

When they arrived at the Crawford house, Helen was surprised that Mrs. Crawford, who was an early riser, did not come out to greet them after they were met at the door. Mrs. Crawford was not receiving callers, the maid explained.

That was very odd. Still, perhaps she had decided to have a lie-in and was still abed. Helen handed the maid the list from Aunt Lavinia and relayed her aunt's instructions. As she was preparing to leave, one of the doors, opening into the foyer, opened and Eric Crawford, looking unaccountably subdued, entered.

"Miss Collins," he said. "I wonder if I might have a word with you?"

Privately?"

"Is anything the matter? Is your mother ill?"

"No, Mother is---not ill. She is merely indisposed at the moment. She ---might we retire to the library? Your duenna may stand outside the room; I assure you, I shall be nothing but the soul of propriety."

He sounded as if he meant it. "Very well," Helen agreed, following Eric into the library. Whittier stood at the door with a woebegone expression on her face.

Eric led her into the room where they were in plain sight of Whittier, but out of earshot.

"Miss Collins," he began, "It truly grieves me to cause you any distress. But I am afraid that I must."

"You are quite sure that your mother is not ailing?" Helen pressed.

"My mother is well. This is another matter. You and I have been . . . very companionable since you arrived in London, and I have cherished your company. I perhaps have given the impression that my affections were more deeply engaged than is the case. The truth is---dash it, I'm sorry to say this, I truly am, but I've fallen most completely in love with another, and---I have proposed to her!"

Helen stared at him. He appeared wretchedly miserable, his exuberant expression entirely downcast.

"It is not flattering for you to look so disheartened when you speak of having fallen in love," she observed calmly.

It was Eric's turn to stare. "Can you forgive me?"

"Yes, of course," she replied, wondering why she was not more upset at his rejection of her when she had spent the recent weeks assuming that a proposal would be forthcoming soon.

Impulsively Eric took her hands in his and kissed them. "Dear Miss Collins, I own that you are a most remarkable woman and I hope that you will find the joy that Harriet and I have found."

"Harriet?"

“Yes, Harriet Lacey. Do you know her?”

“I know a kinswoman of hers, Devonian.”

“Yes, of course. Jack mentioned that you were acquainted with the family, which of course only made me feel even more contrite.”

“There is no need for contrition,” Helen said firmly. “I wish you and Miss Lacey the very best. Please convey my regards.”

“You truly forgive me?”

“There is nothing to forgive,” she said. “You must follow the lead of your heart.”

As I must follow mine, she thought as she and Whittier left the house to return home. *If ever I know where it takes me.*

A Visit to the Orphanage

Eric Crawford did not come to the supper party, but the rest of his family did. As the conversation around them created a hum of noise, Jack Crawford, who was seated next to Helen, told her in a low voice that he was sorry that his brother had disappointed her.

“Eric is a very good sort, you know,” Jack said. “But this . . . I scarcely know what to call it . . . has distressed our mother. She is quite fond of you. She was dreading tonight, but after Eric told her that you had completely forgiven him, she discovered the fortitude to follow through on the invitation she accepted. Does your aunt know?”

“I plan to tell her later, but she was quite occupied with the supper and I had no wish to distract her.”

“Miss Collins . . . not many young women would behave so handsomely when dealt with a surprise of this nature.”

“If your brother has found the woman he loves, he must go to her. I cannot stand in the way of those feelings.”

“You are not at all bothered by it?”

“No . . . “ she said thoughtfully. “It was unexpected, I admit, and I thought that we had a certain understanding. But, you know . . . this is very silly of me.”

“I do not think you a silly young woman.”

“Do you not?” she asked him teasingly.

Jack reddened. “I was younger then, and my pride was damaged. I took your comment much too seriously.”

“I was also younger then, and my comment never should have been uttered. It was entirely selfish and rude. Please accept my apology for all the unpleasantness that I caused that evening.”

“Miss Collins,” he said, his dark gray eyes unflinching as he looked at her, “any unpleasantness at that moment has been countered tenfold by the sublime pleasure that your company has given me---“

“Jack, my dear, you and Miss Collins are engaged in such an intent conversation that you must needs remember not to hold her captive and prevent her from speaking with her guests,” said his mother, looking worried from her position across the table.

“Miss Collins and I are once again engaged in our ongoing battle of disagreeing with one another. She would have it that Mrs. Siddons’ portrayal of Lady Macbeth is so far superior to that of any other actress that the role should be virtually retired when she leaves the stage. I, on the other hand,” he began as hands applauded the first premise, “believe that it is time for a younger actress to assay the part.”

“Young man!” scolded one of the guests, a burly gentleman who had plainly taken umbrage at Jack’s assessment of Sarah Siddons’ stature, “there had never been a greater actress upon a London stage than Mrs. Siddons.”

“I’ve often wished that I’d lived during the reign of Charles II,” Jack said mischievously, “so that I could have seen Nell Gwyn upon the stage.”

Considering that the elfin Nell Gwyn had been one of the many mistresses of King Charles II, Jack’s comment was an immediate introduction to the topic of the current royal family. Aunt Lavinia gave Jack a disapproving shake of her head at his choice of topics, but she was smiling at his effrontery nonetheless and the discussion, although vigorous, was good-humored.

Helen smiled at Jack. “Deftly done, Mr. Crawford.”

He smiled back. “My mother fears that you will be so outraged by my brother’s defection that you will no longer seek our family’s friendship.”

“That will never be,” Helen declared. “I am too fond of all of you for that.”

“Even of Eric?”

“Eric is part of your family,” Helen said. “My aunt and I are friends with the Crawfords and that will not cease.”

Helen waited until the guests had left and her aunt had retired for the night before she knocked on Aunt Lavinia’s bedroom door. Her aunt was at her writing table.

“My dear, are you not feeling well?” Aunt Lavinia asked. “I thought you long abed by now.”

“I am well, thank you. But I wanted to let you know that Eric Crawford has proposed to another young woman.”

Aunt Lavinia studied her niece. “You do not seem to be in distress at this news. When did you hear it? Was that what you and Jack Crawford were discussing tonight at the table?”

“I learned it this afternoon when I went to deliver your list to Mrs. Crawford. Eric told me. He was very apologetic, but if he has fallen in love with another, what else can he do?”

“You are very philosophical about his announcement. I should almost think that you were not in love with him.”

At this, Helen began sobbing. Immediately, her aunt rose from her chair and went to Helen’s side, enfolding her in a comforting embrace. Helen’s tears flowed freely and Aunt Lavinia let her cry. When the sobs began to subside, Aunt Lavinia produced a handkerchief.

Helen dabbed at her eyes. “I do not wish you to think I am weeping for Eric Crawford,” she said.

“Then who are you weeping for?”

“I fear, Aunt, that I have fallen in love with the wrong Crawford. Jack Crawford has been very kind to me and he has forgiven me for my wretched rudeness last year when he was a guest in my parents’ home and I belittled his prospects. I am grieved now at what I said because, however forgiving he is, he can never forget what I said.”

“Are you sure?”

“How can he? He is very proud of his family. He could never welcome me into it.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he has never given the merest indication that he wishes to replace Eric in my affections.”

“It would be very awkward for him to suddenly do so, as if the void of his brother’s change of heart could so easily be filled. You cannot say for sure, my dear one, what Jack Crawford is thinking. But it’s time to set the Crawfords aside for now and put your mind to something entirely different. There is nothing so beneficial for tidying up one’s most heartfelt thoughts as doing something for others. Why don’t you accompany me to the orphanage tomorrow? There is always something to do and you will be so engrossed in the children that you will not have the time to think of the twists and turns of the human heart.”

“I believe I will,” Helen decided as she wiped away the last traces of her tears. “After all, an orphanage is one place where I may be sure that I shall not encounter a potential husband.”

Aunt Lavinia merely smiled. “One never knows where husbands may be found,” was all she said.

Having made the decision to join her aunt in her charity work, Helen found that she fell asleep easily that night, despite the earlier tempest that had reduced her to tears. The next morning she arose early and donned a simple frock which would have done nothing to enhance her reputation as a well-dressed belle. She pulled her golden hair into a knot at the back of her neck and selected an unpretentious sun bonnet to wear on her head. Even her shoes were without flourish, not so much as a buckle or a bow.

Aunt Lavinia, who was already in the breakfast room eating toast and drinking tea, raised her eyebrows at the sight of her niece in such unprepossessing attire.

“They do say that the test of beauty is for a woman to appear in clothes which do nothing to adorn her. My dear girl, you are truly a beauty, and your choice of clothes proves it. You were not obliged, you know, to dress as if you would be asked to scrub the floors.”

“Am I so plain?” Helen laughed as she sat down and poured tea for herself. Aunt Lavinia preferred for breakfast to be informal with no

servants at their duties and Helen found that she liked the privacy of being with her aunt and no one else who could hear her speak candidly.

“You will never be plain. But your garments do not speak of Madame’s exquisite sense of fashion. Still . . . “ Aunt Lavinia considered her niece’s appearance. “You will always look lovely in blue. And as we are going to be of service and not to impress, you have chosen well, I think. You continue to surprise me, dear.”

“Why?”

“You have acquired a level of maturity that most girls your age do not possess.”

“Perhaps it comes of being rejected by a man I thought was a suitor, and being regarded as shallow by a man I thought I detested.”

“Such a lot of thinking,” Aunt Lavinia murmured. “A brisk ride to the orphanage will cast out the gloomy thoughts and restore you, I am confident of that.”

Helen had no such confidence, but she was agreeable to the effort. She helped her aunt and the servants carry baskets to the wagon; Aunt Lavinia never went to the orphanage without bringing along treats for the children, including fruits and vegetables from the garden and the orchard, and loaves of fresh bread and fruit pies from the kitchen.

“No one is the worse for a treat,” she declared as they rode along, jouncing in their seats despite Lockley’s best efforts to avoid the ruts in the road. It was clear that they were heading to a part of London where the maintenance of the roads was far from a priority, but taking her cue from her aunt, Helen did not complain.

Locksley pulled up the wagon before a long building made of wood. The windows were very small and high, as if the intention were not to allow the children to look outside. It seemed a very grim establishment.

A slender woman dressed in a dowdy gray dress came out as they descended from the wagon. Her smile was as cheerful as her attire was sober. “Mrs. Tellington-Vane, the children are looking forward to your visit as they always do.”

"They are looking forward to my cook's excellent pies," Aunt Lavinia said. "And so they should. I think she has outdone herself."

"You have brought someone new?"

"Yes. Mrs. Crawford could not join us today, so my niece agreed to come along. Miss Helen Collins, Mrs. Aletha Kinselle."

Mrs. Kinselle gave a slight curtsy as if she owed Helen some sort of gesture. Helen put out her hand. "I'm very honored to meet you," she said. "Aunt Lavinia speaks of you and the children so often that nothing would do but I had to find out for myself."

Mrs. Kinselle blushed. "Dear me, you humble me, Miss Collins. We're very blessed to have someone as kind as your aunt taking an interest in the children. Will you come in and meet them?"

"Aunt, do you need my help with the baskets?"

"Locksley will help me. Go ahead in; the children will be delighted to see a pretty young face instead of my old one. Go on," she urged. "They are delightful children, you will find."

"Come this way, Miss Collins. The children are in the visitors' room, waiting. They so look forward to your aunt's visits. Will you be telling the children stories? Mrs. Crawford generally brings a book to read to them."

"I didn't know . . . I would have brought a book. But I daresay I can remember one or two of the stories I enjoyed when I was their age and we shall manage. Have they no books of their own?"

"Books are so very expensive, we simply can't afford them. And however would we manage to have enough for the different ages? They learn to read with the Bible; the vicar is very good about providing those for the children. But I don't know that he approves of stories so we daren't ask him."

"He doesn't approve of stories? Whyever not?"

"Oh . . . if it does not tell a moral tale, many people feel that it is inappropriate for orphans, who are expected to learn that they must always be grateful for what is given to them."

Helen recalled the conversation she had had with Jack Crawford on

the day of the picnic, when she had first voiced that thought that it would be very tiresome to always be expected to show gratitude to others for everything that one received.

"I think I shall manage to remember a story that will amuse them without imperiling their immortal souls," she said with a smile.

Mrs. Kinselle grinned. "You sound so much like your aunt!"

"But Aunt, only imagine not having books of one's own!"

"I agree," Aunt Lavinia said. "But books are very costly and the orphanage must provide as best it can for the children. The governors who run it would not regard books as a reasonable purchase and Mrs. Kinselle is already obliged to make a shilling do the work of a guinea."

"Yes, certainly, but children surely need more than food and shelter in order to thrive."

"Which is why I bring the pies and cakes and treats."

"They love you very much." Helen had been impressed at the way the children, abandoning their decorum, had crowded around her aunt when she entered the room, clamoring for her attention and telling her, in jumbles of words, what they had done since the last visit. One expected to be apprenticed to a cobbler; one had sewn an apron; another had mastered the alphabet; another could write his name. They were small achievements for someone who had never had to give a thought to an education or a livelihood, but to these children, their accomplishments were mighty feats that could mean the opportunity to learn a trade and someday support themselves without depending on the charitable instincts of society.

They had been shy in Helen's company until, while telling them the story of *Androcles and the Lion*, she had let out such a roar that some children had been startled. Then they began to laugh at her playacting, begging her for more. She had told stories until she thought her voice would fail.

"I must bring books on my next visit, Aunt," she said.

Aunt Lavinia was going through the calling cards that had been left. "Books are costly, you know. Lady Bartlett has sent us an invitation

to a ball she is having next month.”

Helen made a face. “Lady Bartlett? Is she the mother of Gordon Lassiter?”

“Yes, do you know him?”

“He was visiting the Lacey's last year and Mama invited him to supper. I thought him quite handsome at the time, but after I realized that he was more interested in my opals, pearls, and diamonds than in anything I said, I did not wish to encourage him. May we pass on the invitation?”

“Of course, if you wish. But you’ve been staying home so much of late that I thought you might prefer to go out.”

“No, I do not.”

“You are not pining?”

“For Eric Crawford? No. I wish him and Harriet Lacey well.”

“And Jack?”

“I suppose he is busy with his studies.”

“No doubt. He must think of his future, and that will include matrimony at some point. He must work so that he can provide for a wife, and eventually, for a family.”

Helen exhaled. “Yes,” she said. “I once mocked his ability to buy jewelry for a daughter.” Despite Jack’s kind words disavowing any lingering resentment over her insulting words, Helen cringed at the recollection of her rudeness. How pained he must have been to be mocked in such a manner.

“Jack Crawford doesn’t have a daughter.”

“Yes, I know. I was being . . . as I told you, I was unkind that night.”

“We missed a number of callers,” Lavinia said. “I suspect we shall be inundated tomorrow.”

“Really? Must we be at home?”

“Should we not be?”

“I should prefer to go to the orphanage.”

“Indeed?”

“You were right. While I was there, I never gave a thought to marriage or romance or either Crawford. But now that I am back home, I find myself torn asunder again, thinking of Jack Crawford.”

“You go to the orphanage. I shall stay home and entertain the callers. Mrs. Kinselle will be the better for your time spent entertaining the young ones. If you’re going to the orphanage, we’d best get to the booksellers, or you shall be so hoarse by tomorrow’s end that you shall have no voice left.”

She did not dress quite as plainly as she had done the day before. She decided to wear the cotton print dress that she had donned the day she had invited Jack Crawford to lunch so that she would not be ostentatious in her attire. She thought ruefully as she tied her hair back with a green ribbon.

Of course, the children didn’t notice how she was dressed, especially when she sat down in a chair and encouraged them all to sit on the floor in a circle around her. “I have some items in this bag that I think you will all enjoy,” she said, building up the suspense before revealing the books that she and Aunt Lavinia had purchased the day before. “What do you think they are?”

“New stockings!” shouted out one lad, taller than the rest, who from his words was likely outgrowing his socks. Helen resolved to knit him a new pair.

“Not stockings.”

“A bonnet!”

Poor girls, their hats were very plain. “No, not a bonnet.”

They continued to guess, until finally, Helen began to pull the book from the bag. When the children saw the corner of the book emerge, they began to shout and cheer.

Helen began to read, changing her voice for the different characters and adopting different expressions for them. The children edged closer so that they would not miss anything. She was so engrossed in the reading that she didn’t notice when Mrs. Kinselle brought

another person into the room, until one of the children shouted out, “Mr. Crawford! Miss Collins is reading us a story!”

“I see that,” said a familiar voice. Helen looked up from the page to see Jack Crawford standing on the outer edge of the encircling children, his hair disheveled, his neck cloth simply knotted, his shirt, trousers, and waistcoat not in the peak of fashion and his boots muddy from the outdoors.

He was smiling. “Go on, Miss Collins. I should like to hear the story.”

It was not easy to recover her poise and return to her reading with the same theatrical spirit that she had displayed, but Helen swallowed and turned the page. She read with great gusto, encouraging the children to take part whenever the story called for voices, and when she closed the book, the children begged for another.

“Mr. Crawford may have something for you to do,” she said.

“Mr. Crawford is quite willing to listen to another story,” he said equably, “so long as Miss Collins is willing to read one.”

Miss Collins was willing. The children made room for Jack Crawford so that he could sit with them on the floor and he nimbly joined them, cross-legged as they were, while she read. Then she read another. After that, Jack Crawford said that it was time for them to stand up and go outside to play. He had brought a ball.

Mrs. Kinselle joined Helen, who was watching as the boys and girls ran and giggled and chased the ball.

“Every week he comes,” Mrs. Kinselle said affectionately. “The Crawfords are very good to the orphanage and they are generous in their support. I know they aren’t a wealthy family but you’d never guess it, the way they provide for the children. But Mr. Crawford, now, he does even more. He says children need to play as much as they need to eat and sleep and learn. He’ll make a wonderful father one day. Just imagine, if he’s so good to these children who aren’t his, how he will be when he has his own.”

Helen didn’t answer. She remembered her callous words of a year

ago, and the memory burned her with the unkindness she had displayed to a man who was noble and good, while she was bad-tempered and rude. She was not that woman anymore; she realized. She had come to London for the Season so that she would attract a rich, titled husband. Instead, she had fallen in love with a man who was honorable and honest, and willing to work to make his way in the world.

It was time for the children to eat their midday meal. Jack Crawford bade them farewell and Helen did the same. She was reluctant to say good-bye, but Locksley was waiting in the wagon and it was time to return home.

She held out her hand. "It has been a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Crawford."

He began to extend his hand, then withheld it after noticing that dirt from the yard play remained on his palm. "I shall beg leave to shake your hand when I am wearing less of Mother Earth," he said.

"I don't mind a dirty handshake," she said, "when it comes from an honest man."

He held out his hand and she took it. "Now look what I've done to your fine gloves," he said.

"Gloves will wash."

He held her hand in his, the imprint of his soiled hand plain upon the fabric. Then he brought her gloved hand to his lips and kissed it, holding her fast in his gaze so that she could not look away.

"Locksley," he called. "Would you do me the favor of riding my horse so that I may drive the wagon with Miss Collins? I must speak with her. You shall, if you please, ride behind us so that you can report to Mrs. Tellington-Vane that all the niceties have been observed."

Locksley grinned. "It'll be my pleasure, sir."

"Miss Collins? Do you consent?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice because she felt as if something that was both momentous and fragile was taking place and if she failed to offer the proper caution, it would disappear.

Jack Crawford lifted her into the wagon, then got in on the other side and took the reins, slapping them against the horses so that they began to move. Behind them, she could hear the steady, slow pace of Jack's horse as Locksley followed. He was not, she noticed, close enough to be able to overhear.

"Miss Collins," he said. "I am about to do something which you might regard as base. I hope you will forgive me."

"You could never do anything base, Mr. Crawford, and it is I who must beg your forgiveness."

He shook his head. "Can we not consign an episode from the past to remain there? It has no part in our present unless we choose to let it. I was arrogant and I behaved ignobly."

"As was I."

"Then let us agree that we will foreswear such conduct in the future."

"Agreed," she said happily. "I would very much like for us to continue our friendship as we were doing."

"That, I am sad to say, is not possible, Miss Collins."

Helen gasped as tears stung her eyes. "Mr. Crawford, I thought you said that the past was over with."

"So I did. But the present is very much with us, and how can you ask me to continue to be your friend when I have fallen in love with you and I want you to be my wife?"

Was she hearing correctly? Had Jack Crawford just proposed?

"Your silence is ominous, Miss Collins," he remarked. "Have I been precipitate in my assumptions that you have come to care for me as I have come to care for you?"

"No—oh, no, not at all! You have exactly interpreted my feelings. When I saw you at the orphanage today, I thought my heart would pound so loudly that you would surely hear it!"

"I had the advantage. Your aunt told me where you were, so I knew that I would see you. I counted upon it."

"Aunt Lavinia has been your advocate from the very beginning."

"Yes," he said smugly. "I gathered as much when she told me where you were. My own mother was delighted when I told her that I had fallen in love with you. She has become so fond of you that she feared, after Eric, that you would not want to see her ever again. I told her that I intended to propose to you, and if you accepted me, you would be seeing much of her and all of us. Eric as well," he finished with a sidelong glance. "Will you be able to do that?"

"I think that I will enjoy having Eric as my brother-in-law. I will enjoy it much more than I would if he were my husband," she replied firmly.

"Locksley!" Jack called behind him. "I must ask you to admire those rose bushes on the right for a time. Will you do so?"

"Certainly, sir."

"You will not tell Mrs. Tellington-Vane, when we return, how long you spent admiring the roses?"

"Tain't likely she'll ask, sir. They are very fine rose bushes."

"Very fine indeed," Jack said as he put her arm around Helen and drew her closer to him, close enough so that he could kiss her. Their lips met in a long, searching kiss that a duenna would have forbidden. But as Locksley had noted, the rose bushes were very fine, and were worthy of a prolonged scrutiny, so he was not a witness to the kissing that was taking place in front of him.

* * *

The Prodigal Marquess

Clean Regency Romance

The Family In Disgrace

The marquess gazed down upon Rupert with shrewd, searing brown eyes that seemed to miss nothing. Day after day, the very first Rupert Cavanaugh, The Most Honourable The Marquess of Mercat, evaluated the drawing room and its occupants as if he were once again inspecting his troops before going into battle. His descendant, the twenty-two-year-old current marquess, wondered what kind of advice his ancestor would give if he could leave the canvas, emerge from the frame, and speak.

What would he say about the previous marquess, Henry, who had indulged his fondness for gambling, drinking, and reckless spending until the family fortune was depleted and ancestral treasures had to be sold to appease creditors? Some of the creditors, Rupert corrected himself, with the habitual adherence to the truth that had so irritated his father (who preferred a fuzzy, cloudy assessment of the family accounts); the others were daily knocking on the door, demanding to be paid with the fiscal bloodlust of tradesmen who sensed the raw meat of impoverishment looming.

Rupert had closed the London house. It was too expensive to maintain during the season, when one was expected to entertain and return calls. Besides, it had served its purpose; his sisters, the Ladies Alana and Nicole Cavanagh, had both married earlier in the spring. Not to titled members of the aristocracy, it was true, and that had deeply offended Lady Mercat, who saw only shame in having sons-in-law who were simply Mr. Cadford, a solicitor from London, and Mr. Watson, an Oxford professor.

Rupert understood his mother's distress but he did not share it. His sisters were married to decent men who could take care of them financially. What good would a title with no money have been to two young women with no dowries? Rupert suspected that, against all expectations, Alana was in love with her solicitor husband, who adored her; and Nicole, with her bluestocking ways and radical

ideas, influenced by the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, was well suited to being the wife of a liberal educator who relished her talent for sparking conversation from her literary knowledge. Neither would be wealthy, but they would not starve.

“What would you do, my lord?” Rupert asked the painting. The first marquess had been given the title by a grateful Charles II upon the Stuart king’s return to England, following his father’s execution by Cromwell. The estate near Manchester had been bestowed upon him; the lands were profitable, the farming lucrative, the tenants reliable and the manor itself regarded as an architectural masterpiece. Charles knew how to express his appreciation in ways that maintained loyalty, and there was nothing so binding as land. “Where would you find the funds?” Rupert continued.

The marquess in the painting had a noble visage but his eyes were good-humored. Those wandering years of flight with Charles Stuart had given him a glimpse of life as aristocrats and royals never saw it. The entourage of cavaliers that accompanied the rightful king had learned to live by their wits and the largesse of European courts, where Charles Stuart was welcomed. Once back in England, with the Stuart prince restored to the throne and his followers the recipients of his gratitude, the first Rupert Cavanaugh had appreciated his title, but he had not enjoyed life at the dissolute court. Instead, he spent his days on his family estate and, through the generations, his descendants had inherited the same loyalty to their property.

Until Henry, of course, who, born in an England ruled by the Hanovers and not the Stuarts, had relished his aristocratic upbringing and all the vices that accompanied London life. He had inherited wealth and married an heiress, but from the time he was sent down from Oxford for his misconduct, until his covert flight to France, Henry had regarded his estate as a repository of jewels, heirloom furnishings, priceless paintings, and collections that could be sold or pawned to finance his various mistresses and his gambling.

Lady Mercat was overwhelmed and had taken to her bed after her husband had slipped away, fleeing England for France and leaving Rupert to handle the scandal, the debts, and the uncertainty of a future without means. When, shortly thereafter, news had reached

them that Henry had gotten himself killed in a duel, her health had taken a sharp downward turn. When Rupert wasn't making arrangements with his debtors or finding heirlooms that he could bear to part with, he was trying to raise her spirits. But she was beyond his persuasion, preferring the solitude of a bedroom with the drapes drawn and the shutters closed.

Eggins had not left them. Rupert had had to go to the servants' hall and explain that, because he could no longer pay them their wages, the best he could do was write them a reference and speak well of their qualifications to members of the gentry who sought servants. But Eggins, his mother's lady's maid, had refused to leave. Rupert was humbled by her loyalty, even as he begged her to think of her own wellbeing. "My lady needs me," she had said, and that was the end of it. She spent her days reading the Bible, sometimes aloud to Lady Mercat, coaxing her to drink beef broth and tea, and prevailing upon her as often as possible to permit the opening of the drapes to let in a bit of light. She was very persuasive and gently relentless and, counted it a triumph if her ladyship finished a bowl of broth and sat up in bed.

The first marquess had known trials, Rupert acknowledged, as well as peril. Charles Stuart had been a hunted man and those who followed him were seen by Cromwell as traitors. Rupert Cavanagh, in the seventeenth century, had lived by his wits and the generosity of royal courts, but he had risen above travail and settled into Mercat as a master of land, title, and status. Would the current Rupert Cavanagh be the one to lose it all?

The marquess' silent consultation with the first marquess was interrupted by a knock on the door. Steeling himself to meet yet another surly tradesman, irate that the food, or clothing, or hay that the family had bought and used was yet unpaid, Rupert headed for the door. He was his own butler now, he reflected, noting with a trace of irony that perhaps that was an occupation for which he was qualified. What else had he done during his life but be waited on? He had the wardrobe, after all, and the discretion.

A son of Henry Cavanagh certainly learned discretion at a very young age. Papa was "indisposed", was the acceptable answer to anyone who sought the marquess at any hour before noon, whether they be a creditor dunning him for payment of a bill, a gentleman

who came for the honoring of gambling debt, an inconvenient caller, or even Lady Mercat, if she wanted to speak with her husband the morning after he had spent the night with a lady of easy virtue. Rupert was accustomed to dissembling on behalf of his father; perhaps that was why he was such a stickler for honesty in his own dealings.

He opened the door. It was not a creditor who stood before him. A young woman, her abundant dark hair concealed by a kerchief tied around her head, was at the door. She wore an extraordinary costume: gentleman's trousers and a shirt that managed to accentuate her femininity rather than mask it; leather boots and gloves; and a loose-fitting waistcoat. But even more remarkable than her garb was the hunter's bow that was slung over one shoulder along with a quiver of arrows. Her mirthful blue eyes looked upon Rupert with exuberant humor and, despite himself, Rupert found himself smiling at the odd-looking creature.

The Marquess' Ally

"Miranda!" Rupert exclaimed. "You look . . ."

"Shocking?" she finished for him, walking past him into the foyer, once a grand entrance and now merely a barren room denuded of its exquisite statuary. "My father would say I'm shocking, but, fortunately, he is in London and hasn't seen me. Cook will be very pleased when I snare a nice, plump partridge for her to prepare."

"I would say that you look dashing," he said, grinning.

"You, on the other hand, look glum, so I suppose one of us might as well look dashing," she returned, striking a buccaneer's pose. "What's amiss? What have you done with the Sevres?" she asked, noticing the absence of the vase from its accustomed position upon the plinth.

"Sold it to pay for food for my mother," Rupert said bluntly. With Miranda, there was no need for a masquerade.

"Lady Mercat? Why?"

Rupert took a deep breath. "Because I'm going to leave England."

Miranda stared in disbelief, her exuberance fading. "Leave England? But, Rupert, where will you go? France? You surely can't go to France, not with Napoleon a menace to England and Englishmen."

"No, not to France." Rupert closed the doors to the drawing room, although there was no need for privacy, with the household staff dismissed and Eggins upstairs with his mother. "To America."

"America!" Miranda cried out. "Why on earth would you go there? It's the end of the world, Rupert."

Despite himself, Rupert felt a smile spread across his face. "Not exactly," he corrected her. "They defeated us in two wars."

“Because they fight like barbarians, my father always says.”

“If it means victory, I should think that a very astute strategy. And, my dear Miranda, might I point out that you are dressed in what some might describe as a barbaric costume?” But he spoke with affection because he and Miranda, who was three years his junior, had been friends since childhood. They had explored the outdoor world beyond the elegant and stately manors of their ancestral homes, preferring hide-and-seek in the forest, and devouring windfalls from the orchards; they had graduated from tame ponies to sleek, swift horses from the stables, riding through the village and across the grounds with no regard for their own safety. Rupert had followed the traditional role of the eldest son: going away to school at Eton, then Oxford, but summers and school holidays were always spent with Miranda Jones.

Miranda was anything but traditional. She should have already had her coming out during a London season, but Miranda loathed the city, and her father, who had two sons and three other daughters, found that it was easier to accede to his youngest daughter’s peculiar ways than to chastise her. He frequently warned her, nonetheless, that it was the duty of a woman to marry and she would eventually be expected to do her duty. But he had left with his family for London in the spring and, now that summer was upon them, he was occupied with other matters, leaving Miranda to enjoy the liberty afforded her by her family’s absence.

Her eyes filled with sparkling tears. “Rupert, I shall miss you so much,” she said, her voice quavering.

“I shall return, I promise.” Rupert took her hands in his. “I must go somewhere where I can make my way in the world. There’s nothing here but debts and dishonor for me. I don’t wish to leave my mother, but I have no choice.”

“When will you leave?” Miranda sank into the sofa as if she were too overwhelmed by the news of his planned departure to stand.

“As soon as I can procure the money for the voyage. I’m going through the house to find something to sell. I cannot leave my mother with nothing; she must be cared for while I’m gone.” He signed. “Unfortunately, I’ve already used just about everything I

could find that my father hadn't already sold, so that my mother won't be plagued by the creditors. I'm going to have to sell the rest of the horses and the carriage, because there's no means to afford a stable-hand to care for them."

"You know that Father will always allow my lady to use our carriage," Miranda said earnestly. "Please have no worry on that score. And I will look in on her often, to make sure that she is well."

"Thank you, Miranda. That relieves me a great deal. Eggins, her maid, is staying with her. I told her there's no money for wages, but she's decided to stay anyway. I can't leave her with no means, so the sale of the horses and the carriage will see to her needs. It will be modest, spread out over time, but I've sent word to Larchester, the family solicitor, so that he can see to it. If you can call often, at least once a week, it will ease my mind."

"Of course. I shall be glad to do so. But what shall you do in America?"

The truth was that he didn't know. America beckoned because it was the unknown – a place where the iron-clad social protocol of England had no bearing. In America, it was said that a man could rise from humble beginnings to great heights if he were but willing to apply himself and work hard. Rupert did not know if he had the qualities that Americans sought, but he knew that he did not possess the traits that were required of an Englishman in society. A man with a title and no fortune could go to America and carve out his destiny. But in England, he was known by what he lacked, and society was merciless.

"When will you leave?" Miranda, her bow and arrow incongruously placed on the dark wine-colored satin of the sofa, studied Rupert earnestly.

"I'm going through the manor now, trying to find what I can sell to provide for Mother, without ransacking her home. She's devastated by my father's abandonment. I can't leave her bereft of the things that give her pleasure."

"I can help," Miranda said suddenly. "If you must go, then let me help you."

Rupert smiled gently. "Miranda," he said affectionately, "I cannot take your money." Privately, he doubted that Miranda possessed any money of her own. Her father was a rather tight-fisted man who kept a close eye on the household accounts. It would be like Miranda, passionately loyal and idealistic, to believe that she could eat less at meals and save money on the domestic budget.

"Then we shall call it a loan," she declared. "That will mean that you must come back to me."

"I hope to return." He nodded. "But I cannot come back unless I can restore my family's status and fortune."

"You will come back," she said positively, tears glittering like a cascade of jewels in her lashes. "You must come back."

"Miranda—"

He was not quite sure how it happened, but Miranda stood up and his arms were around her as they shared a kiss that disclosed feelings neither had ever expressed. For all that her clothes were bizarre by fashionable standards, her body was soft and womanly, her lips welcoming. He breathed her name as if it meant something he had just discovered.

Finally, they separated to stare, stunned, at one another.

"I will come back, Miranda," Rupert vowed. "I will come back."

A Destination

But it was not so simple, and a vow to return was predicated upon his being able to leave in the first place. Rupert was in the library, going over the accounts yet again, when there was a knock on the door.

Eggins entered. "Lord Mercat," she said, "My lady is poorly. I can't get her to eat today. She's so frail; I think she needs a doctor."

Rupert rose. "I'll go and fetch Dr. Everard. Thank you, Eggins. Please continue to stay with her; I believe you bring her much comfort."

Fortunately, he hadn't sold the remaining horse in the stable. He saddled Caesar himself and, moving at a rapid trot, quickly arrived at the home of the physician, who was at breakfast. The housekeeper opened the door of the drawing room and announced him.

"Mercat," Dr. Everard said. The doctor was a brusque man known for his unadorned manner and his complete lack of obsequiousness. He was just as abrupt with a member of the aristocracy ailing from gout as he was when treating a housemaid with a fever. But, despite his lack of airs, his skill was so highly regarded that his practice thrived. Patients wanted to be cured and, while the village physician made no claims that he could cure every malady, he was known for simple, effective treatments that were often successful. Bracing country air was one of his favorite bits of medicinal advice; another was abstinence from excessive liquor and rich food. He knew which salves to prescribe and which tonics performed as needed, but he was a doctor of the spirit as well as the anatomy and never forgot that mind and body worked together.

"My mother is unwell," Rupert said, announcing his purpose as he walked into the room.

Dr. Everard gestured toward the chair at the table. "Have some coffee," he advised as if he were making a diagnosis. "You look as if you could use it."

Rupert began to object but the doctor waved away his comments. "Lady Mercat is considerably distressed, and small wonder. Your father, my lord, was a coward and a bounder."

Rupert did not demur. "Dr. Everard, I cannot defend my father."

"Sit down. Have some coffee. I'll tend to your mother after breakfast. She's not ill; she's morose."

"Yes, but she's not eating and she keeps to her bed."

"She must face the truth. It's not a pleasant thing, the truth. How bad is it?"

"Quite bad," Rupert admitted. It was a relief to express himself with candor to the doctor. He had been honest with Miranda, but they were friends of long standing and Miranda was by past practice and her own nature on his side. The passionate kiss and embrace that they had shared a week ago still startled Rupert – the memory had lost nothing in vitality as the days passed. He had not seen Miranda since that day – a decision of his own choice. He feared that if he saw her, his resolve to leave Great Britain would falter and he would stay. That would be an admission of defeat.

"Debts."

"Yes."

"Too many to pay?"

"There's nothing to pay them with. The estate has not been well maintained. I have done what I can but it's not enough."

"I've known your father since before you were born and I don't ever remember a time when my lord saw any reason to pay his tailor when he could use the money for his own entertainment. You're more like your grandfather. And that's a good thing to be."

Rupert remembered his grandfather, a stern man who still took the time to discuss the estate with his grandson. It was from his grandfather that Rupert had inherited his love of the land, a bond

that transcended his title. One's social station, his grandfather had said, was not a promissory note for titled young gentlemen to behave with reckless abandon. One's land, one's tenants, and one's standing among gentlemen were a legacy from the Almighty.

"What are you going to do?" Dr. Everard inquired after he'd finished chewing a forkful of eggs.

Despite his conviction that he was not hungry, Rupert found himself acquiescing to the doctor's insistence that he break his fast. The maid brought a plate and Rupert filled it with food from the sideboard.

"I believe I must emigrate," Rupert said. He had not revealed his intentions to anyone but Miranda, but it was a very different matter to tell a childhood friend compared to telling a seasoned adult who had known Rupert in swaddling clothes.

The doctor chewed on a piece of toast, frowning as he considered what Rupert had said. "The colonies, I suppose?"

"America, yes."

Dr. Everard's hand brushed away the semantic quibbling. He still thought of America as one of the colonies, even though the country had been established as an independent nation for three decades. "Rough sort of place, they say. Not at all what you're accustomed to."

"I'm aware of that. But my situation is beyond repair."

"If you leave, you'll give credence to those who claim that you're the wastrel who's run through the family fortune." As Rupert opened his mouth to protest, he continued, "Calm down. I know better and so does anyone who's been paying heed to what's transpired over the years, ever since your grandfather died and your father ascended to the title. But not everyone will bother to do that. You'll leave in disgrace and your mother will have to bear the brunt of that scorn."

"My mother is likely to live in retirement and will not be moving in social circles. I simply want to make sure that she is provided for in my absence. Her maid has agreed to remain with her, and Miss Jones is going to look in on her regularly while I am away."

He colored as he spoke. The perceptive doctor noticed the response to the mention of the baron's daughter. His brows raised but he said nothing. "Miss Jones is as good as her word," was all that he said. "It will be a lonely existence for your mother. Local gentry may shun her. I shall make a point of calling upon her, as her physician. When you arrive in the colonies, send me your address so that I can keep you appraised of her situation." His lip twisted. "Although I daresay that Miss Jones will be a most dedicated correspondent," he finished wryly.

"Then you agree that I should go?" Rupert inquired, valuing the doctor's opinion.

"I don't see why you need to go to that godforsaken place," Dr. Everard said. "France is out of the question, of course, and with Napoleon all over the Continent, there's no getting away from French influence. If it were me, I'd purchase a commission and join the military. But I suppose you've already thought of that."

Wearily, Rupert nodded. "Joining the army would do nothing to restore the family name or fortune," he said. "In America, I have hopes of doing both."

"See that you don't get scalped by one of those savages," Dr. Everard advised. "You don't want that fine head of hair to be adorning a brave's wigwam."

"I don't plan to venture into the wilderness. I'm looking for a settlement where I can work and rise to a position of success."

"You might try Pittsburgh."

"Where?"

"Pittsburgh – used to be a fort when we were still there," the doctor recalled. "It's on the frontier, but I gather that it's a bit more settled down now than it was when we fought the French. The colonials fought with us on that war. Fickle lot, the colonials. Still, there are fortunes to be made, and no mistake. They say the land is better than a bank vault."

"Why Pittsburgh?" Rupert asked, helping himself to another helping of bacon and eggs.

“Going to war with us helped them,” the doctor explained, observing as Rupert eagerly dove into a second plate of breakfast. “When they couldn’t get our products because of the war, they started making their own. Pittsburgh makes glass, tin, and iron. Brass, too. But it’s coal that’s going to make the city rich.”

“Coal?”

“Fuel. Pittsburgh sits on a huge seam. The world is changing, my lord.” He put down his napkin. “Men are building things. Machines. Great noisy things, no doubt, but change will come. If I were a young man looking to make a name for myself and a fortune to match, I’d be heading west to Pittsburgh. It’s in Pennsylvania.”

That was no help to Rupert. Despite his plan to go to America, Rupert knew nothing about the geography of his destination. But talking to the doctor had given Rupert a destination that was more now than simply a spot on an unfamiliar map.

Leaving Home

“Miranda—” he objected, but she backed away, her hands behind her, childlike, so that he could not return the bag of money she had given him.

“No,” Miranda said. “I sold some of my grandmother’s jewels. Gran gave them to me, not to my father or my mother. She said that men have too much control over a woman’s possessions and she wanted to guarantee that I had property of my own.”

The bag was heavy. He wondered how Miranda had managed to sell the jewels. She was resourceful, he knew, and daring, but even so, how had she found someone to arrange the sale for her? Perhaps he was better off not asking.

Miranda had sent a message to him that she had money for his voyage. He detested himself for having to accept her generosity, and vowed that he would pay her back as soon as he was earning wages. He had asked her to meet him on the outskirts of the village, in the early morning hours before he made his way to Manchester to begin his voyage. Miranda was an habitual early riser and none of the servants would be surprised at her dawn leave-taking. Now they were together in the quiet of the morning, their horses hidden from view by the stretch of woods that resumed after the last few houses on the edge of the village.

Miranda had been crying – he could tell that from her swollen lids and red eyes – but she met his look without flinching. “So you see, you will have to respect my independence when we are married,” she informed him with a return of her former swagger.

She always made him smile. “Are we getting married?” he inquired, amused and charmed by her winsome ways. Only Miranda would think of making a proposal of marriage to a penniless man who was leaving England under a cloud.

Miranda lifted her head. "Of course. You and this American venture are an investment. You must be sure that I profit from it."

"Are you so sure that marriage to me would bring you profit?" he asked. His tone was casual but his eyes were intense. "You know that the entire county has decided I am to blame for my family's fall from grace."

"That is only because you are here and your father is not!" Miranda defended him fiercely. "Your father was a coward, and I'll say it to anyone who has the courage to listen to the truth. He abandoned Lady Mercat and left you to remedy the situation."

She probably knew that the local gentry were avoiding him and, earlier in the week, Lord and Lady Melchette, seeing him pass by as they entered the theater, had deliberately cut him, turning their backs on him as he greeted them. The theater crowd had followed suit and Rupert, who had been walking by because he lacked the funds to summon a hackney cab, had walked through the crowd with his head, and his color, high.

"You will come back and they will all regret their actions," Miranda predicted. Her features were ignited with outrage at what he had endured. "I will proudly stand at your side when you return."

"You are a remarkable young lady," Rupert said. "I am not worthy of you."

Miranda stepped closer; mere inches separated them. She was not crying now. Her sapphire-blue eyes shot sparks of fire as she considered the calumny that he faced. "Return to me, Rupert," she whispered, clutching at the panels of his waistcoat. "Promise me that you will return."

He had promised, but he had refused to hold her to an engagement, despite her pleas. He could not be sure of what he would encounter in America, or even if he would survive. Miranda deserved to be free to marry if she met someone who suited her. She was brave, but unworldly, and her heated defense of him was offered in ignorance of what would have been her fate had she been his fiancée. "I am called the prodigal marquess," he said with a faint smile, trying to hide his response to such an insult. "Did you hear that?"

"You know that I am the only one at home," she replied with dignity. "My family is in London. I do not go calling and I do not attend to gossip."

Rupert smiled. "If I can recovery my name and my fortune in America, I will return to claim you," he promised.

Miranda was so close to him now that there was no space between them. Standing on the tips of her toes, she offered her lips to him. Rupert bent his head and allowed himself, for a brief and blissful oasis of escape, the joy of meeting her lips with his own and kissing her in a manner that professed how he felt, which words alone could not possibly express. Miranda's arms enclosed him and her slender body curved against his as if she could protect him from the slings and arrows of society.

"Take me with you," she breathed into his ear. "Please, Rupert, don't leave me."

For a wild moment, he considered her request. Marry and take her with him. Why not? She was intrepid enough to adapt to new ways of living; she had already turned her back on the expected behavior of a baron's daughter. What could a young woman like Miranda accomplish in a country unbound by the weight of traditions?

Then cold reason, rising to the fore of his mind even as his body responded to the delicious warmth of her body, returned. He was leaving England to go to a country where he had no family, no business contacts, and no prospects at all. He was making the voyage on money that she had provided for him with the sale of her grandmother's jewels. What kind of man would he be if he took her away from the safety and familiarity of her home to bring her to a wild frontier?

Gently, he disengaged himself from her embrace. "I cannot. I must go. You know why. But I must rely on you to look after my mother while I am away."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks, but at his words she nodded. "I will care for her as if she were my own mother. I promise you that, Rupert."

He knew that she would not fail him. Young as she was, Miranda

was, at nineteen, the person that she would still be in fifty years, because her standards and virtues were so staunch. They had been friends for so long that neither, until this crisis, had realized their friendship had transformed into something more. Friendship was not a cornerstone of matrimony in London society; it was sufficient for a man and woman of high birth to find that their interests were mutual and that, by uniting, they could perpetuate their position in the aristocracy. Miranda had no interest in London's *haute monde*, and he had been exiled from it. Outcasts that they were, they now had one another.

"I love you," he said. Then she was in his arms again, the two of them sharing a barrage of kisses fierce and wild, each knowing that it could be years before they were once again in each other's arms.

"One more favor," he said. "It may become necessary, in fact I'm sure that it will become necessary, to sell more of the household items. My mother will need guidance and I am sure that your father will be able to counsel her well. Please do not let them sell the portrait of the first marquess."

"The painting in the drawing room – of course," she replied immediately. "I shall let my father know. He will understand."

The baron likely would understand. He was a man who regarded his own family ancestry as sacrosanct and would share Rupert's reverence for the man who had built the family's reputation.

"Will you write to me?" Miranda asked him.

"I will try. I have no idea what they do for letters in America," he said jocularly. "For all I know, they don't even have a postal service and I shall have to send you messages by carrier pigeon."

"Write to me," she implored him. "Whenever you can. As often as you can. As soon as you are settled, let me know where letters can be sent to you. You will do that?"

He took her hands in his. "Miss Jones, I promise that I will honor your investment," he said with a smile. "If I cannot come back and make of you a wealthy wife, I will join one of the Indian tribes and make my way in the world as a hunter."

"I'm a better hunter than you," she declared. "If you do not make

your fortune, send for me and I'll join you in the tribe.”

He would not let her ride any farther. The farewells would weaken his resolve. He left her standing by the sweeping foliage of the magnificent village trees that had seen centuries of lovers pledging their devotion to one another, and would be seeing them for centuries more. England was a country that would endure. America was a country that had no history of which to speak. It was to that untamed and rootless nation that he would journey.

Rupert Cavanaugh, Coal Miner

It was Rupert Cavanaugh, and not the Marquess of Mercat, who boarded the *Livingstone*, the ship that would take him to Philadelphia. He had a small cabin to himself, but he found himself spending time on deck whenever possible, despite the rough crossing. Although an experienced sailor, Rupert had never been on a journey of such length, and he found that the tiny cabin made the travails of nautical traveling more bothersome.

The ship arrived in Philadelphia on a bright, hot summer day. Glad to be on land again, Rupert was able to find lodgings in a tavern on the docks. Immediately he began to investigate the cost of a conveyance to take him to Pittsburgh.

"Pittsburgh!" exclaimed the innkeeper as he served Rupert his meal later in the day. It was still early in the evening, a fortuitous time for Rupert to dine as there was no rush of diners. The innkeeper was a man who relished the social aspects of his occupation as, having delivered a plate of roasted chicken, he paused to ask his lodger where he was headed.

"Yes. Why not?" Dr. Everard had been so optimistic about the Pennsylvania city that Rupert had not even considered any other location.

"It's clear on the other side of the state! Three hundred miles to the west."

"Shall I be able to get there?"

"Oh, surely," the innkeeper said. "Plenty are heading west. There's more land that way than any of us have ever seen."

"What can you tell me about Pittsburgh?"

"It's called the Gateway to the West," said the innkeeper, accepting his role as information source with ease. But his approach was very

different from that of an English innkeeper. Taking Rupert's query as an invitation to join him, the innkeeper took advantage of the fact that business was slow to sit down opposite Rupert. "Their rivers are better than their roads," he continued. "You can get anywhere you want with whatever goods you're trading on the rivers."

"What goods are traded?"

The innkeeper grew eloquent on the prospects of the western city of Pennsylvania and its natural resources. "Mind, you won't find the amenities we have in Philadelphia," he warned. "We've been settled here for over a hundred years." His ruddy face shone with pride. "Pittsburgh is a younger city. The fort was named for the prime minister, you know."

Rupert hadn't known that. He was too young to remember the American colonies when they were part of the British Empire, and when its citizens were British subjects. "Go on," he said, listening eagerly as he devoured the excellent meal that the innkeeper had provided. He needed information and the voluble innkeeper was the ideal source.

"You'll be crossing the Alleghenies to get there," the innkeeper said. "It's a fair distance and if the people waited for things to be shipped there, they'd grow old before they arrived. So they've started making their own products. They've a lot of skilled workers. Started out building ships. But they make what they need and grow what they eat. Very independent.

"Now that the war is over, trade is going to come on like you won't believe. They've built canals, too, and steamboats are shipping coal as far south as New Orleans."

"Coal?" Dr. Everard had been confident about the role that coal played in the American future and his enthusiasm had inspired Rupert with direction.

"Why, Pittsburgh sits on coal like your King over in England sits on a throne," chuckled the innkeeper, pleased with his rather inaccurate comparison. "Steamboats are delivering coal all the way up and down the Monongahela River. If you want to run on steam, you need coal. It's the way of the future. You've heard of anthracite

coal?”

Rupert shook his head. He'd barely given a thought to coal at all and now it was determining his future.

“Well, you'll be hearing a lot about it,” predicted the innkeeper. “I'm getting thirsty doing all this talking. Can I refill your ale?”

“Yes, thank you.”

When the innkeeper returned, his own throat lubricated by a generous draft of ale, he continued to enlighten Rupert about coal. Pittsburgh was blessed with thick seams of it, and anthracite coal was a natural resource that was destined, the innkeeper promised, to become a favorite. “A little of it goes a long way,” he explained. “It's going to make Pittsburgh a rich city. Not as rich as Philadelphia, of course, but they'll do all right. Why are you asking about coal?”

“That's why I'm going to Pittsburgh.”

“For the coal? Most people who are heading west go for the land.”

“I have land,” Rupert said briefly.

“You have land and you've come this far for coal?”

“Yes.” It was too complicated to explain.

The innkeeper shook his head. “If it's coal you want,” he said, “you'll find it in Pittsburgh.”

Rupert remembered that conversation often during the following months. He spent a short time in Philadelphia, working on the docks to save up the money he needed for the trip west, but never losing sight of his intentions. Finally, after an endless journey in a Conestoga wagon, he crossed the Allegheny Mountains to find work in a coal patch. There were many other miners of British origin in the mine where he found work – rough, homespun men who were used to hard labor, as Rupert was not. But they were kind to him, showing him how to use his tools, what to watch out for in what was a dangerous operation, and how to evolve from an unskilled novice into a productive collier.

The first time Rupert saw his face, black with grime, in a mirror

after a day down the mine, he was shocked. He realized that to be a miner meant to come to terms with the peril of death, which could strike suddenly and without warning, or slowly and in a debilitating fashion as the miners' lungs succumbed to the invasive dust.

He had two goals: to become good enough to make his fortune mining the wealth that was hidden underground, and to survive. As his hands became calloused and his sinews developed, he came to terms with the fact that, in order to thrive in this foreign land, he would have to master nature itself. The dirt seamed his palms and darkened his fingernails was something that no English gentlemen would have withstood. His fellow miners, intrigued by the toff who spoke like a Dook, as they put it, were impressed by the pace of his learning, but they were amazed when they discovered that he knew how to read and write.

"What are you doing down here in the mines, when you could be up in the office working with the boss?" one of the miners asked him.

But there was no money to be made as a clerk. Rupert worked long hours and saved as much as he could. The mine owners had built housing for the workers; the structures were shoddy and a far cry from what Rupert was used to, but he didn't waste any time yearning for the forgotten elegance of Mercat. As soon as he had settled into his residence, he wrote to Miranda, letting her know that he had arrived and was working toward the day when he could return to England and make her his bride. At night, no matter how exhausted he was, he re-read her letters before falling asleep.

Dearest Rupert,

I received your letter with great excitement. Your journey sounds most thrilling, but I confess that I have been anxious throughout these long weeks, awaiting word from you. I pray every night that God will watch over you and keep you well.

Your mother fares well, all things considered. Dr. Everard has insisted that she take a stroll in the gardens every day, and the faithful Eggins accompanies her. I have started a garden for her and, as we are having a wonderfully long summer, I expect that we will benefit from the warm weather. From what we harvest out of the garden and what I procure

from my hunting, I am confident that your mother will not go hungry, so please do not fret for her wellbeing. I have told her of our understanding; I know that you would not have wished me to do so, but I could not keep such a secret from your mother. She will not disclose what I told her but she has said that she is very happy at the thought that I will become her daughter-in-law.

Everlastingly your

Miranda

She told him that she wrote weekly, but not all of her letters reached him. He treasured those that did, keeping them inside the family Bible that he had brought with him from England. He responded weekly as well, but could tell from her letters that not all of his mail reached her. Enough did, however, and their correspondence was a mainstay of his days, because her words reminded him of why he had come to Pittsburgh. It was not to choke and cough on the coal dust, or to come out into the day, blinking at the unbearable brightness of light striking his eyes after hours spent in the dim underground. It was to make his fortune and return home to Miranda.

Miranda Waits

Miranda hugged the envelope close to her bosom. No one in her family knew that she kept up correspondence with the discredited son of Henry Cavanaugh, although her father approved of her diligence in looking after Lady Mercat. Rupert's mother had found her spirits revived by Miranda's company, and the romance that blossomed despite the distance that separated Miranda and her son.

Eggs, whose talents as a lady's maid were hardly needed anymore, thanks to the marchioness' retirement from society, did the cooking and cleaning and seemed content. Mindful of Rupert's instructions, Miranda had given Lady Mercat the funds he had provided so that Eggs would have wages, even if they were minimal, and the arrangement suited both women.

But Miranda's discerning eye noticed that the manor was beginning to look shabby. The grounds, once so painstakingly maintained, were overgrown. As each winter came, it was obvious that more of the household's possessions would need to be sold in order to provide fuel for the fires. Miranda managed to keep the ladies supplied with meat, thanks to her hunting talents, and the garden's produce was put up to last through the cold months. But the house was chilly and so most of the rooms were closed off, as Lady Mercat opted to live in a few rooms on the second floor.

Whenever Miranda came to call, Lady Mercat welcomed her as if nothing had changed. Eggs brewed tea so that Lady Mercat and Miranda could visit and talk about Rupert's letters, and the remarkable stories he had to tell about the exotic land so far away.

Miranda did not tell Lady Mercat that her father's impatience over her spinsterhood was increasing. He had married off his other daughters and was angry that Miranda was so obdurate as to refuse to entertain suitors. Miranda's mother had died when she was young and there was no woman to mediate between father and

daughter. Miranda's sisters and brothers alike were frustrated by her inexplicable refusal to enter the marriage market.

Rupert had been gone nearly four years. His letters assured Miranda that it would not be long now before he would be in a position to come home.

Darling Miranda,

I have had such a piece of fortune that I could not wait to put ink to paper to share it with you. I have bought a mine! Yes, you have read that correctly. I continue to work in one mine, but I own another. The original owner has fallen ill and intends to return to his home in Virginia, a state which does not suffer from the difficult winters that we experience. I am very busy as I pursue both enterprises, but I am invigorated by the opportunities that are before me. I believe that, if all continues to thrive, I will be able to return home next year.

That letter from the previous year was the first to predict his success, a saga which subsequent letters continued. Miranda did not tell him that her father was pressuring her to wed, or that the baron had begun to invite eligible gentlemen to the family estate with the obvious intention of introducing her to her future bridegroom.

Hearing the approach of her father's heavy tread, Miranda quickly concealed the letter inside her sleeve.

Lord Longley glowered as he saw her, dressed in her customary garb: loose-fitting trousers and a long tunic. "You'll dress like a baron's daughter tonight!" he ordered. "Lord Albert Crestwell is coming to dine with us. He's the heir to his family's estate, he's a widower with a young daughter to raise and he's looking for a wife. Your sons will inherit."

"My sons! I have not even met the man and now you have me pregnant!"

Lord Longley winced at her blunt language. "You will not," he said through clenched teeth, "speak in that disgusting manner in the company of his lordship, do you understand? You are the daughter of a baron and I expect you to conduct yourself in the appropriate manner. I have told Lord Crestwell that the reason you have

avoided society is because you are very modest and shy.”

“I’m not going to marry him,” she retorted.

“It is unnatural for a woman of four-and-twenty to be unmarried,” her father replied. “I have invited gentlemen for you to meet and you have disdained to entertain their suit. You will not refuse Lord Crestwell. You will attire yourself as I direct, you will be polite and welcoming to his lordship, and you will accept his request to call upon you.”

“And if I do not?”

Lord Longley drew in his breath. “I shall disown you,” he said finally. “You will be driven from your home. I have been indulgent for far too long and you have neglected the obedience that a daughter owes to her father. If you are still determined to be headstrong, you will not behave so under my roof.”

He turned away without another word.

Miranda stared at him as he walked from her. She knew that he meant what he had said. Her father was not a harsh man but he was head of the household and he expected his children to heed him. Miranda, because she had avoided the London season, had become accustomed to following her own dictates during the months when he was in the city. As his other children followed his orders and made their successful marriages, Miranda’s refusal had become more offensive to him. He would not have been appeased, she realized, if he knew that she was promised to Lord Rupert, who in her father’s view was a wastrel who had abandoned his family.

Miranda thought bitterly how unfair people were to blame Rupert when it was his father, Henry, who had run from his responsibilities, placing his wife and son in their precarious financial situation. It was Henry who had depleted the family finances, plundered the family estate, and failed in his duties to his family, but Rupert was blamed for what had transpired. She had divulged his location to no one and so, to the village, he had simply disappeared, just as his father had.

Dispiritedly, Miranda walked up the stairs to her bedroom. She would not dishonor her father by displaying rudeness to a guest.

But if Lord Crestwell expected to leave tonight with marriage in the offing, he would be disappointed.

The dress she wore when she stood at her father's side to welcome their guest was slightly out of fashion, because Miranda was not in the least interested in the latest styles, but it was a becoming shade of blue. The necklace at her throat was one of her late mother's pieces and the sapphires matched the blue of her eyes. Lord Longley had given her a look of approval as she descended the staircase, confident that his threat to disown her had borne fruit.

Lord Crestwell was middle-aged and balding. He appraised Miranda with a covetous eye that made her uncomfortably aware of her gown's low neckline.

"Lady Miranda," he said, bowing to bestow a damp kiss upon her hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you. We have not been honored with your presence during the season."

"No," she replied.

Lord Crestwell did not take her reticence amiss, clearly believing that she was the modest, shy woman her father had described. During the meal, she maintained the charade, speaking in monosyllables when she was addressed, but otherwise staying out of the conversation. The two men were forced to carry on their discourse without a contribution from her.

"Lady Miranda," Lord Crestwell said, "will we see you in London this year?"

"No."

"But what if you should marry? Would you not then accompany the gentleman who would be honored to become your husband?"

"I do not plan to marry."

Lord Albert, clearly confused, looked to Lord Longley for clarification.

"My daughter is very retiring," Lord William explained quickly. "She prefers country living to the city."

"But if she were married, she would of course do her duty to her

husband, would she not?" Lord Crestwell insisted, addressing her father because Miranda, head bowed over her plate, continued to eat her meal as if there were no conversation going on.

"Of course she would," Lord Longley replied, his voice resolute. "She will be a dutiful wife. Is that not so, Miranda?"

Miranda placed her fork and knife on her plate. She dabbed at her mouth with the monogrammed linen napkin, put it back down, and rose from her chair.

"No," she replied. "I will not."

Disinherited

As Miranda had expected, Lady Mercat was delighted to welcome Miranda into the household, but as she entered Mercat, Miranda could not help but notice that the estate had suffered during the hard winter which was just now receding. Because of the snow and ice, Miranda had not been able to visit weekly as she had in past years, but now that she was here, and intending to stay, she resolved to be of use.

“Lady Mercat,” she said one evening when they were in the upstairs chamber that the dowager marchioness used for a parlor. They were sewing but the light from the candle was poor and even Miranda had difficulty in seeing her stitches. The days would begin to lengthen as spring approached, but Miranda didn’t propose to depend on the change of the season for an improvement in their domestic quarters. “Would it trouble you very much if we moved into the cottage? I’ve noticed it when I’ve gone out to hunt and it’s still in quite good shape. The roof doesn’t leak and it’s very sturdy. I think that it could prove to be quite comfortable.”

Lady Mercat put down her sewing and considered the matter thoughtfully. “The cottage,” she mused. “It would be much easier to keep warm. We wouldn’t need to use nearly as much fuel. It’s quite cozy, as I recall.”

“Yes,” Miranda agreed, eager to build upon Lady Naomi’s positive perspective. “It’s also larger than it looks. You would be comfortable and all of the rooms could be used.”

“My dear, I don’t know what we’d do without you. Do you, Eggins?”

“No, my lady,” Eggins replied, smiling over the scarf that she was knitting.

“Capital! How shall we move?”

“Let me take care of it,” Miranda urged. “I believe that I can get some help in the village.”

She was purposefully vague, and with reason. She wasn’t sure how Lady Mercat would feel if she knew that Miranda’s hunting had introduced her to villagers and tenant farmers who, like Miranda, were seeking to supplement their food supply with meat they obtained thanks to their skills with the bow and arrow. The men had been startled at first when they came upon the baron’s daughter seeking prey in the forest, but they soon came to respect her skill and, now that she was disowned and cast from her father’s residence, they had come to regard her, if not as one of their own, at least as someone who had her own living to make and was doing it as best she could. Miranda was confident that they would assist in moving the marchioness’ possessions from the manor to the cottage without expecting to be paid.

“Of course, my dear Miranda. You’re so clever.”

And so it was taken care of, and Lady Mercat, her maid, and Miranda, were settled into the cottage, where, as Miranda had predicted, they found the accommodations cozy and appealing. Eggins was delighted to have a room of her own and, even though it wasn’t much bigger than a closet, it faced the sun and brought the day’s warmth in.

Eggins and Miranda had an unspoken pact to make sure that Lady Mercat did not have to surrender any more of the trappings of her status as a dowager marchioness than their current way of living required. So it was that Eggins, the fastidious lady’s maid, and Miranda, the outdoorsy free spirit, tackled the cooking, cleaning, and maintenance of the cottage. When spring came and the ground was soft after the thaw, Miranda got a garden underway – a much more ambitious one than she had previously prepared. She hunted regularly and was proud of her success. Eggins proved creative with recipes and had no qualms when it came to skinning and cleaning the quarry that Miranda had caught. Despite the vast difference in their social stations, Miranda and Eggins conversed more as if they were friends than a baron’s daughter and a servant.

Life was very different now from what it had been when she was subject to her father’s rule. The night when she had left the table

after telling Lord Albert that she would not be a dutiful wife, Miranda had gone upstairs to her room and packed the clothing that she expected to wear, leaving behind the ball gowns and finery that would have been for the daughter her father plainly wished she had been. She took with her the locket that had belonged to her mother, her grandmother's prayer book, and a few items for personal use. She had walked the distance to her new home with Lady Mercat.

She had not encountered her father since that episode and he had made no attempt to find her. Perhaps he knew where she was and was relieved that, despite his pronouncement, she was not desolate and abandoned. She knew that her father was not a cruel man, but he expected absolute obedience from his children and Miranda, with her independence, had defied him for too long.

Rupert was unaware of her changed circumstances, but Miranda had managed to inform her father's housekeeper that she received correspondence from America, and would Mrs. Logan please be sure that she received the letters? Mrs. Logan, who kept her opinions to herself but was fond of Miranda and silently felt that the baron was being unreasonable, had promised to make sure that any correspondence addressed to Miss Miranda would be delivered.

Miranda didn't want Rupert to know what had happened. He would be troubled by what he regarded as the sacrifices she was forced to make on his behalf. He wouldn't understand that, even if she had not realized she was in love with him, she would not have married any of the men her father had presented as suitors. She had a feeling that Rupert, who had been somewhat traditional in his views when he left England, might be undergoing a change of perspective now that he was living in a country where new traditions were being formed.

He owned two coal mines now, and was no longer going underground with the other miners, he had written. Running the business demanded his time. But he had learned much from his labor and he was putting the lessons to good use. He expected to be home this year, he had written in his most recent letter, but he could not be more specific.

If I still can claim your heart, then I pray that you will allow me to seek your hand in marriage. Dearest, beloved Miranda, I think of you constantly and yearn for the day when I can present myself as a worthy suitor.

Ever yours,

Rupert

With the prospect of Rupert's return, a garden in bloom, fresh meat to eat and enough to sell in the village, Miranda realized that she was happier than she had been in a long time. Independence appealed to her and so did usefulness. Eggins was as proud of returning home with coins in her purse from the vegetables and meat that she had sold as she had formerly been in dressing Lady Mercat for an elegant ball. Lady Mercat, comfortable, well fed and cared for, eagerly awaited her son's arrival. They were a contented household.

When Eggins was away in the village, Miranda took her place in cleaning the animals she caught. She was outside, efficiently cleaning some rabbits when she heard the noise of horses approaching. Looking up, Miranda saw that the horses each carried a rider. Strangers. They approached with confidence, plainly not alarmed by the sight of a lone woman working on a domestic chore, and failing to note that her ruthless efficiency with a hunting knife meant that she was not at all defenseless. They saw the knife, but they did not see the pistol that Miranda kept in the commodious pocket of her full skirt.

"You there!" called one of the men as the horses drew nearer.

Miranda kept her hand on the knife. "May I assist you?" she asked cordially, making no effort to wipe the blood from her hands as she continued to clean the rabbits.

"You can get off this land," the other man said.

"This land is the home of Lady Mercat, the dowager marchioness," Miranda replied. "She will not leave her home and you would be well advised to leave her alone."

"This land, the buildings, everything down to that rabbit you're

skinning, belongs to Mr. Wayland, who owns the adjoining property. I can prove it, if you can read.”

Dismounting, he presented a document to Miranda, who calmly plucked it from his hands despite his protests.

“Hey, you’re getting blood on it!”

“Why, so I am. How came you by this document?”

“Lord Mercat was in debt to Mr. Wayland. This is repayment.”

“It’s very odd that the elder Lord Mercat, who has been dead these six years, should have managed to get himself into debt with his neighbor,” Miranda commented, holding the document with both hands and smearing more of the rabbits’ blood on it.

“It’s a longstanding debt,” the burlier of the two gentlemen said sullenly. “There’s been no one here to serve it on.”

“On the contrary, Lady Mercat has been here every day and is certainly authorized to represent the family’s interests.”

“She’s a woman,” said the taller of the two gentlemen. “The father is dead, and the son, as well.”

“Who told you that the marquess is dead?” she demanded.

“He hasn’t been seen in nearly five years. That’s as close to dead as a court is likely to want.”

He was astounded to find himself staring into the pistol that Miranda had pulled from her pocket. “We can consider the various ways in which the matter of death can be proven,” she said calmly, “or you may leave the premises immediately. I assure you, I am not likely to miss at such close range, and after I shoot you, I can shoot your partner’s horse. He won’t get far, and I have my knife.”

The man backed away. “You’ll see us again!”

“Then you shall see this again,” she replied, brandishing the pistol in one hand and the knife in the other.

Danger!

Once she was assured that the bloodstains on the document did not belong to Miranda, Lady Mercat was able to turn her attention to the words written upon it. "Lowell Wayland has always wanted to get his greedy hands on Mercat," she declared indignantly. "He knows that the woods will fetch a pretty price for timber. The only reason Henry never cut down the timber is because it would have taken too long and when he was out of funds, he didn't have time to tarry. What shall we do, Miranda? There's no telling when Rupert will actually return and these men sound like thugs, capable of any sort of violence."

"We must make sure that the firearms are loaded at all times," Miranda said decisively. "We must not be unarmed. We must be on our guard."

"But Miranda, dearest, we can't shoot them."

"We can defend ourselves against attack," Miranda said stubbornly. Rupert had asked her to take care of his mother while he was away, and Miranda intended to honor that request. She would not allow bullies to frighten Lady Mercat away from her home, and if that meant firing a gun to keep them away, then she was prepared to pull the trigger.

She thought that she was prepared for whatever Mr. Lowell Wayland intended to do to frighten Lady Mercat away. The entrance door to the cottage was securely barred. There was a knife or firearm in every room in the cottage. Miranda had taken to sleeping in day clothes so that, if required, she could rise from her bed at any hour to defend Lady Mercat and Eggins.

That need came, but in a form that no gun or knife could protect against. A week after the men had first threatened Miranda, the ladies went to bed. They had taken to going to bed later than usual so that there was less time when they were unable to keep watch

for intruders. Suddenly, Miranda, whose bedroom faced the estate, saw a bright light coming through the window. Bolting from her bed, she saw flames climbing into the sky.

“Fire! Lady Mercat, Eggins! Fire!”

The women heard her. “The manor,” Miranda told them. “It’s on fire!”

Miranda insisted that they stay inside. They had no way of knowing who might be on the grounds, she told them, and they would not be safe if they went out into the darkness. As the flames devoured the stately edifice to which Lady Mercat had come as a bride, the dowager marchioness wept and watched. It was no longer the elegant residence that generations of Cavanaugh had been proud to call their ancestral home, but, nonetheless, to lose it was a devastating blow.

Then, framed by the flames behind him, a man stepped in front of the house. “Seven days!” he bellowed. “You have seven days to leave. If you’re not gone, we’ll set fire to the cottage, with you in it!”

Lady Mercat, overwhelmed, staggered and would have fallen if not for the waiting arms of Eggins, who helped her into a nearby chair. Miranda stayed at the window, saying nothing, her gaze fixed upon the man who threatened them.

“I mean it!” he warned. “Seven days!”

He seemed to expect a response from within the cottage, but Miranda refused to satisfy his expectations and finally, with silence as the only response to his announcements, he turned and disappeared into the darkness.

“What shall we do?” Lady Mercat moaned. “We have nowhere to go.”

Eggins tucked a blanket around the dowager’s waist. “Don’t lose faith, my lady,” she begged. “The Lord will not abandon us. Remember what He promised us: ‘Lo, I am with you always.’ We must pray, my lady.”

Obediently, Lady Mercat bowed her head. “You pray, Miranda; I’m

much too distraught.”

“Eggins, will you pray for us?” Miranda asked as she continued to stare out the window at the burning house. She was too angry for prayer just now. What would they do? The men would make good on their threat, she knew, and Lady Mercat’s frail spirit could not withstand the violence that they promised.

Rupert, where are you? Why are you not here?

Unbeknownst to Miranda, Rupert was in Manchester. Because of the unpredictable delivery of the mail and his being intent on surprising her, he had already left America. His frugal habits remained, but this time he sailed in comfort with gold in his trunks, leaving behind a healthy bank account that would continue to grow, thanks to the profitability of his mines. He did not realize as he disembarked from the ship that, although he was dressed in the manner of a gentleman, the previous five years had altered his appearance. His face no longer bore the smooth white countenance of a man of leisure, who spent his days in comfort. He was tanned and vigorous in appearance, the muscles of his calves and arms requiring consideration by the tailor from whom he ordered the wardrobe he needed for his triumphant return to England.

He found rooms in an inn which catered to a wellborn clientele, knowing that in order to make his return the triumph it needed to be for the restoration of his name, he was obliged to return to his life as a marquess. He attended to business, establishing himself with the Manchester bank and re-establishing his connections with the firm of solicitors who had always handled Cavanaugh matters and would be taking care of his current business affairs. His return was so unexpected that he had hard work to establish his identity, but finally he convinced them that he was indeed Henry Cavanagh’s son.

Thomas Kent, the banker who had handled Cavanaugh financial matters since the former marquess had come into his inheritance, and the son of the man who had managed them for the previous marquess, took off his spectacles and wiped his eyes.

“No mistake, my lord, you’re unexpected and all the more welcome for it. Can it be six years since your father’s been gone?”

“It can.”

“I suppose you’ll be looking to get the estate up in order again.”

“Yes, in due time. I have my own means and income, and I will be handling the business affairs from now on. My first priority is of course, my mother.”

“Of course. I trust she is well?”

“As well as she can be, but I left her in good hands. Miss Miranda Jones, the daughter of the baron, agreed to look after my mother during my absence.”

“Miss Miranda?” Kent looked concerned.

“What is the matter?” Rupert demanded, feeling his chest tighten at the banker’s tone of voice.

“Lord Longley disinherited her and has cast her out of the family home.”

“What on earth for?”

“She wouldn’t marry where he ordered. A spirited young lady, but I fear for her. What can a woman hope to do without the protection of a gentleman? Lord Mercat, where are you going? Lord Mercat!”

But Thomas Kent was speaking to a door. Rupert had already departed.

Wasting no time waiting for transport, Rupert bought a horse – a powerful, high-spirited stallion whose hooves easily pounded the terrain that to Mercat. He traveled too fast to be able to savor the sights of England, and the memory of the American landscape was still fresh in his memory. America had left its mark on him. But he was no longer the struggling son of a dissolute marquess. He had come back, as he intended, as a man of substantial means. He was the owner now of multiple coal mines and the growth of the steamboat industry meant that his finances continued to profit. But what would that mean if Miranda could not share his fortune?

The village was near. He slowed his mount, fondly remembering the days when he and Miranda had raced their ponies through the streets. How unexpectedly life had turned out.

He was both eager and apprehensive about his return, and his pace slowed the closer he got to the grounds of Mercat. But then, conscious of the fact that much remained to be determined, he threw caution to the wind. The broad expanse of woods that would bring him home was near and he spurred his horse onward.

The hooves echoed in the open air. Miranda, who never left the cottage for very long any more, heard them. Hurrying into the cottage, she gave the signal that she had told Lady Mercat and Eggins to expect. Each woman picked up a wrapped parcel and silently followed Miranda into the woods, where she had constructed a shelter for them. It would not do for a permanent home, but it would provide shelter when Lowell Wayland's thugs returned to make good on their promise.

The women, as they retreated deeper into the forest, could hear the sound of the hooves nearing the house. Lady Mercat gasped, but Eggins was immediately at her side, urging her forward. They reached the shelter that Miranda had built, grateful to be safe. The forest would protect them.

Rupert Returns

It was gone. Mercat was nothing more than a huge heap of charred timber, sprawled on the ground. Rupert stared in disbelief. Gone. The manor that the first marquess had built was gone. Where was his mother?

Rupert pulled on the reins. Where was Miranda?

He urged his horse forward. He needed answers and that meant going to his former neighbors. Lord William Longley had, according to banker Thomas Kent, cast his daughter from the family home, but he might know something, and it was there that Rupert needed to go.

The butler came back with the response that Lord Longley would receive Rupert, but the baron came out to the foyer himself before the butler finished speaking.

“Rupert! We thought you were dead.”

“I am not, as you can see.”

“Yes, well, there was no word.”

“On the contrary, there was word,” Rupert answered, his voice crisp and authoritative. “I wrote weekly to Miss Jones, my fiancée.”

“You – fiancée! What do you mean?” Lord Longley stuttered.

“I understand that you have disinherited your daughter,” Rupert continued, his habit of leadership easily transferring from a business setting to this social one. “I hope that you will be able to tell me her whereabouts. I wish to establish a wedding date as soon as possible. I have returned home to find my home destroyed. Do you know anything about that?”

“Destroyed! Mercat? Surely—”

“Did you not hear?”

“I have not – that is – I have not seen – your manor is not – that is . . .

“Since my father’s disgrace and my leave-taking, I see that, except for Miranda’s care and compassion, my mother has been left to her own devices, and now her home is gone. I will of course rebuild it and I plan to do so magnificently. Your daughter will live in the height of elegance, should she so choose. But she will choose. Do you know where she is?”

“I – she has not contacted me.” Lord Longley avoided Rupert’s accusatory gaze.

“Can you blame her?”

Lord Longley did not answer.

“Longley, will you answer me?”

“I give you permission to marry my daughter,” Lord Longley answered, taking refuge in formality.

“Do you, indeed? Is that not presumptuous of you, given that you do not know where she is?”

“You have said that you are in communication with her. Had I but known that, I would have consented—”

“Would you have done? Would you have consented to the suit of the prodigal marquess?” Rupert challenged. “Would you have welcomed me as a son-in-law when I was destitute and my family disgraced because my father absconded, leaving behind only debts and shame?”

“I – as you did not offer for her, we cannot answer that to the satisfaction of either of us,” Lord Longley replied. “You look prosperous enough now and she must marry someone!” he finished in exasperation.

“I suggest that we endeavor to find her before you marry her off,” Rupert said. “Beginning tomorrow morning, I plan to undertake a search of the grounds. I trust that I can count on you and men of your household to assist?”

“Of course, of course. I shall be glad—”

“Very good,” Rupert said, cutting him off and heading toward the door. “I shall meet you at Mercat at eight o’clock. Thank you. I bid you good night.”

Lord Longley and the men of his household arrived at Mercat shortly after Rupert. Lord Longley cast an appraising eye over Rupert’s horse, noting as well that the marquess was attired fashionably. But it was more than his mount and his wardrobe that reflected the change. Lord William didn’t know how Rupert had spent his time during the five years that he had been absent from England, but it was apparent that the time had been spent profitably.

Rupert gave orders to the men, instructing them to fan out and comb the grounds in an orderly fashion. When anyone discovered the women, he was instructed to fire two shots into the air so that the others would know the search had been successfully concluded.

“Longley, you and I will head straight into the deepest part of the woods,” Rupert said, giving Miranda’s father no opportunity to dispute him. Rupert leading, they rode into the forest, where the trees were thick and the sunlight was sparse, appearing now and then only as a bright and brilliant interruption to the arboreal roof that kept the darkness inside. From his childhood, Rupert knew the paths well; he and Miranda had explored every inch of the grounds in their youth and he found that his memory was reliable.

He noticed indications that others had traveled this unmarked path before he and Lord Longley. They had traveled on foot, not on horseback, and their pace had been slow. Was it possible that Miranda, who knew the forest better than anyone, had brought his mother here to keep her safe, for some reason?

Suddenly, he detected movement ahead, slight and swift, but it had intruded upon the stillness of the forest and he moved ahead in the direction of what he had seen.

“Miranda!” he called out, reasoning that the sound of his voice calling her name could reassure her that she was not in danger. “Miranda!”

“Rupert?”

Rupert wheeled his horse around to confront the voice that he heard from behind.

Miranda stood there, pistol in hand.

“Put that thing away!” ordered her father. “You’ll shoot somebody.”

“That would be the intent if I pulled the trigger,” she answered, but her line of sight went past him to fall upon Rupert, who was dismounting from his horse. Miranda raced into his waiting arms and, ignoring her father’s presence, met his mouth in a long, starved kiss that showed how much she had missed him.

Lord Longley’s mouth curled. He raised his pistol into the air and fired two shots.

The lovers parted. “You’ll frighten Lady Mercat,” Miranda told him in disapproval.

“My mother? Is she well?”

“She will be better when she has a roof over her head,” Miranda answered, “and when she has seen for herself that you are alive and well.”

“Lady Mercat can stay with us,” Lord Longley said. “Lord Mercat, you and your mother are invited to join us in our home as my guests. Miranda, I would be pleased to have you return to your home. Lord Mercat has acquainted me with the circumstances that have transpired during the past five years.”

Rupert’s eyes were twinkling with a mischievous glint. “Miss Jones,” he said in dignified tones. “Your father has consented to my request to seek your hand in marriage.”

Miranda, her head held high, struggled to keep a smile from her face. “Has he?” she asked. “I shall be glad to consider your proposal, my lord.”

“Consider his proposal!” repeated Lord Lonely. “After kissing a man in that fashion, I should say the banns had better be announced without delay. To think that a daughter of mine should throw herself at a man in such a forward fashion, a man she hasn’t seen

for five years—”

However, the couple had returned to their embrace and neither was listening to him. Lord Longley could hear the sound of the searchers as they approached, following the shots that had announced that the quest had been successful.

“Stop it, I say! Stop that!” Lord Longley glanced behind him. The searchers were closer. He went to the couple, locked in an embrace so passionate that they might as well have been alone in the forest. He wrested them apart. “Have you no decency! One would think that you were given over to your emotions! It’s shameful, I say! What would your mother say?”

“Lady Mercat!” Miranda belatedly recalled that the dowager marchioness was still in the shelter, unaware of what had happened and more than likely fearful that the shots that had been fired indicated some dire event. “Rupert, you must go to her immediately.”

“Gladly,” Rupert said, “if I only knew where she was.”

Miranda grinned. “Follow me.”

“Forever, my love, and to the ends of the earth.”

Lord Longley rolled his eyes. Shameful! The sooner they were married, the better, before they become known as a couple so lost to passion that they were actually marrying for love – something unheard of in aristocratic circles. Lord Longley had been ashamed of his daughter for her independent ways, but it would be much worse to have a daughter who was notorious for actually marrying the man she loved, with no regard paid to the social customs of the times!

The Triumphant Marquess

“Monstrous!” Lord Longley exclaimed when his daughter, Rupert, Lady Mercat and her maid had returned with him to his estate and Miranda had filled the company in on the series of circumstances that had led to their flight into the forest. “I’m going to post guards around the estate. I assure you that no further harm will come to your home, Lady Mercat.”

“Thank you, Lord Longley,” Lady Mercat said. Her joy at her son’s return seemed to have erased the uncertainty of the previous five years. The welcome that Lord Longley had offered restored her to her station. She had dined in stately comfort for the evening meal in the baron’s dining room and looked forward to sleeping in one of the majestic guest bedrooms of the manor hall. “Lowell Wayland is behind this, and his claims are false. I don’t know how it will be proven, but the estate was my husband’s, and now my son’s. And dear Miranda’s, of course. I am glad that she and Rupert will marry for love. They have proven their regard for one another and they will not be subject to the ordeal that many other women must endure. I hope that when the time comes, and you have daughters of an age to marry, you will both allow them a voice in the decision of whom to choose for a husband.”

“Lady Mercat!” Lord Longley objected. “It is unseemly to speak of offspring when they are not even officially engaged. I am shocked at your boldness.”

“Lord Longley, I was a dutiful wife who minded her tongue and did as she was bade. When my husband left me and my son to face the trials that he had created, I was weak and feeble and I did not provide Rupert with the soundness of judgment that he deserved. He has returned to me, and I want to know more about what happened in America.”

Miranda was aware of the outlines of his progression from penniless

traveler to laboring coal miner to prosperous businessman, but she was not aware of the many details of that journey.

“Coal?” Lord Longley repeated in confused dismay. “You worked in a coal mine? You, a marquess, was a common laborer?”

“I was.” Rupert held out his hands. They were not the smooth, flawless hands of a gentleman of leisure. “I was quite good at it, actually, after I learned how to be a miner.”

Lord Longley looked dubious. “I suppose you can keep that part of your success a private matter. There is surely no need to let the *ton* know that you actually worked for wages. I’m not sure that your reputation would survive it.”

To his amazement, Rupert burst into laughter. “Longley, my reputation suffered when I was known as the prodigal marquess and falsely accused of having been the vice-riddled wastrel who brought my family to its lowest ebb. Those who would despise me now for having bent my back to labor can go to the d_l, for all I care. But they should know that, during my time in America, I managed to make contact with representatives of the British Government, who are quite interested in learning more about anthracite coal and what kind of trade agreements can be arranged. I have an appointment with the Prince Regent’s man to discuss the matter.”

“The Prince Regent!” Lord Longley repeated incredulously.

“Yes. Coal is going to take the Empire in the direction that the nineteenth century is destined to follow. We must either take the lead or we will be delegated to follow. The Prince is reported to be interested in what I have to say. I have also contacted, through my sister’s husband, a legal expert, who will be able to hat Lowell Wayland’s fraudulent claims to my family’s estate. I intend to rebuild Mercat in a manner that would make my ancestor, the first marquess, proud. I am sorry that so much of the Cavanaugh estate has been lost, but when the first marquess became master of the estate, he had nothing but his own ingenuity and courage. I am an insignificant imitator of his achievements, but I am confident that I will do his legacy justice.”

Miranda’s eyes were shining. “When Mercat is rebuilt,” she told him, “the portrait of the first marquess will be above the mantel as

it was before.”

“The portrait was not destroyed in the fire?”

“No, indeed,” Lady Mercat told him. “Miranda insisted that we bring it with us when we moved to the cottage, and there it remains. But I think it would be advisable, Lord Longley, to make sure that your guards keep the cottage secure.”

“The cottage has been under guard since we left the forest this morning,” Lord Longley assured her. “Lowell Wayland and his bullies will not dare to trespass upon Cavanaugh property.”

“And once the legal matters are resolved, I think it’s safe to say that Mr. Wayland and his desire to lay claim to Mercat will be halted. I intend to pursue the destruction of the manor through official channels and will be bringing legal proceedings against him. Of course” – Rupert smiled as he looked at Miranda, who had so abandoned propriety that she was leaning her head against his chest, oblivious to her father’s disapproval – “I shall have to do so through my representatives, as by then my wife and are likely to be enjoying our honeymoon.”

“Where shall you go?” Lady Mercat wanted to know.

Rupert looked at Miranda. “Where would you like to go?”

“I should very much like to see America,” Miranda declared.

“America!” repeated Lord Longley, aghast at the notion. “Why in heaven’s name would you want to go there for your honeymoon?”

But Miranda, meeting Rupert’s eyes, knew that she didn’t need to answer. Rupert knew that Miranda wanted to see for herself the country that had given him the opportunity to restore his name and his honor. England would never understand that a marquess could redeem himself by working in a coal mine, but the metamorphosis had taken place in America. The first marquess would have understood.

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* * *

On Wings of Love

Clean Regency Romance

The Season of Death

Mrs. Sullivan pulled back the curtain and looked outside. The trees that in spring, summer and fall were magnificently adorned with leaves were now stripped of their foliage and the bare, haggard branches reached upwards as if beseeching the skies to be warm again and clothe them. However, the sky, austere and stern with the gray foreboding of snow to come, did not respond. It was December; the sky seemed to remind them. What did they expect? Winter was the season of death. The ground was barren. The streams were cold and if the pattern continued, the lakes would freeze. For the young, of course, winter was a time of frivolity and pleasure. There would be sleigh rides across the snow and skating on the lake. They would gather at one another's homes for evenings of games and fun and warm beverages that would see them home. But for those who were young in years, but heavy in hearts, winter brought no delight.

A lone figure, all in black, appeared. Mrs. Sullivan sighed. Clara, her granddaughter, was young, but she was a widow. For her, the mourning that had begun when her ailing husband Tom had died, in the late summer, was a way of life that did not depend upon convention for its authenticity. Clara seemed to be dead too, walking about the house as if nothing mattered to her. Nothing ignited her interest. She had always been such a warm, lively child and as a young woman, passionately in love with Tom, she was always the center of gaiety. Even when Tom fell ill with a wasting illness that had sapped him of his strength until it robbed him of life, she had been determined that he would get well. However, the grave had claimed him and now Clara, wan and slender, her features cast in sorrow, looked as if she were in danger of joining him there.

Mrs. Sullivan moved away from the curtain and returned to her seat, picking up her embroidery so that Clara would not know that

her grandmother had been watching her as she returned from her husband's grave, a site she visited daily, no matter the weather. But as she worked her needle through the cloth, Mrs. Sullivan's thoughts were busily traveling in her mind. What could she do? Death had claimed too many of her family. Her husband, dead these many years; her daughter-in-law and son, dead as well, not having lived to see Clara married; another son, killed in battle in the wars against the French, and another daughter lost to childbirth. Death had danced with so many members of the Sullivan family and now it seemed, the macabre master sought Clara as well, just as Death had taken Tom.

Mrs. Sullivan stabbed her needle into her work. She would not lose Clara! She did not know what she could do to prevent it, but somehow, she would see to it that her lovely, kind hearted granddaughter would recover from her grief and return to life. She was too young to surrender to death, Mrs. Sullivan thought.

She heard the front door open. She heard the exchange of voices as Hodges, the butler, spoke with Clara. Hodges had been fond of Clara since she was a child and Mrs. Sullivan knew that he, too, was concerned about the woman, too soon widowed, who lived in the house like a visible ghost. Mrs. Lindsay, the cook, who remembered the mischievous girl who had begged for treats from the kitchen, sought to tempt Clara with her erstwhile favorites dishes, but to no avail; the supper plates returned to the kitchen barely touched. Mrs. Sullivan's maid attempted to interest Clara in a new hair style, one that complement her beautiful pale, golden hair, but Clara, although she thanked her, explained that as she was in mourning, it didn't matter how her hair was dressed, and chose to fasten it in a bun and leave it as it was. Everyone was on a quest to rescue Clara from the decline that they feared she would fall into, but no one knew what to do. No one could bring back Tom, and it seemed that if she could not have Tom living, Clara was content to join him in death.

"It's such a cold day, my dear," Mrs. Sullivan said, placing a smile upon her face as if she had no worries at all and was greeting her granddaughter in a normal fashion. "Why don't I ring for tea? Something to warm you up?"

"If you would like some, Grandmother, I'll ring for it. I am well as I

am, thank you.” Clara sat down on the settee and picked up the knitting that she had left there. She spent hours knitting, her needles moving swiftly over the yarn. At this rate, Mrs. Sullivan thought, the church would be replete with garments for the poor and needy well before Christmas came.

Christmas. It had been Clara’s favorite time as a child. She had loved making presents for others and relished the decorating of the household that had engaged the servants as they, were infected by her enthusiasm, had brought in pine branches and holly to place upon the mantel over the fireplace and on the windowsills. Clara’s parents had always come to stay for Christmas and the family had shared the joys of the season in the house where Clara’s mother had grown up. After Clara’s marriage, she had continued the tradition. Tom’s family lived in India where his father was in the military and he had been delighted to be in England for the season.

What would it be like this year? Clara would not want to celebrate the season. It would be heartless to decorate the house as if this were like any other Christmas. However, the day would come, all the same. Mrs. Sullivan pondered what to do. Perhaps Letty would have an idea. Letty Field, like Mrs. Sullivan a widow, was her closest neighbor and dearest friend. Letty, too, had known loss; it was one of the bonds between the two women. But they had come to terms with their losses, Mrs. Sullivan realized. Letty, whose son and daughter-in-law had died of smallpox five years ago, leaving their daughter Elizabeth in her grandmother’s care, meant that Letty was busy chaperoning the activities of a young, unmarried woman’s social life.

Perhaps that was the solution, Mrs. Sullivan thought after she gave the order for tea to be brought to the drawing room in the hope that Clara would be tempted by some of Mrs. Lindsay’s cakes. It was too soon, of course, for Clara to become engaged in activities, but there was no harm in befriending a young woman who was only several years her junior. It would be pleasant for Clara to call upon Elizabeth, or at least to have someone young to talk to if she would accompany her grandmother when she called upon Letty.

“Come, now, Clara,” Mrs. Sullivan coaxed when the tea tray arrived. “Won’t you have one of these little cakes? You know that Mrs. Lindsay makes them for you. You did so enjoy them when you

were a child.”

“I am no longer a child, Grandmother,” Clara said quietly, her needles moving at the same pace as before. She had not raised her eyes from her work.

“No, my dear, but the ones who have loved you since you were a child are concerned about you and you cannot be so selfish in your grief that you disregard their affections.”

It was harsh, perhaps, but Mrs. Sullivan was a practical woman. There was simply no use in tiptoeing around her granddaughter’s sadness as if it were a vase of flowers that had been inconveniently placed in the room. Emotions could not be discarded when they withered and faded like flowers.

Clara’s head jerked up from her knitting, shocked at her grandmother’s words. “Grandmother!” she cried. “Surely you understand how I feel. Tom is gone from me and he will never come back. How can I endure day after day without him? Surely you do not think that Mrs. Lindsay’s cakes will restore me to joy?”

“No, I do not,” Mrs. Sullivan said. She’d plowed the field, she thought grimly; she might as well plant it. “But you are not the first woman who has lost a beloved husband. You will not be the last. Life demands that we go on. Tom is dead----do not blanch, my dear it is an unpleasant truth but a truth nonetheless—and you are alive. Would you, if you had died and he remained, wish for him to grieve so? Would you not want him to continue to live?”

The thought, clearly, had not occurred to Clara. Mrs. Sullivan had spoken astutely when she referred to the selfishness of Clara’s grief. Mourning could be like that, Mrs. Sullivan perceived, when one was so entombed by it that there was no thought for anything else. However, death could not be appeased. It would come soon enough and there was no sense in welcoming it before its time.

“I—no, of course not, but Grandmother, I loved him so much! Do you not understand?”

“And Tom loved you,” Mrs. Sullivan replied. “As I loved your grandfather and he loved me. As your mother and father loved one another. But what would you have had me do after they died?”

Should I have died also?"

"If only Tom and I had had a child!" Clara exclaimed. "Then I would have something of him." Suddenly, she began to cry, great, gulping sobs that seemed to rob her of her breath. She had not cried like this before, not even when Tom drew his last breath as she sat by his side, holding his hand as if she could will her youth and vigor into his wasted body. The tears that had been pent up inside her burst forth, instantly covering her face in a torrent of tears.

Mrs. Sullivan quickly crossed the room to go to her granddaughter's side, holding her so that Clara could give way to the grief that finally manifested itself in something besides listless withdrawal. Her tears were passionate and heart-rending, but they were, Mrs. Sullivan knew, an affirmation of life. As she held her granddaughter close to her breast, letting Clara release all her sorrow in sobbing exhalations, she recognized what her granddaughter did not. It was time to live again.

The Call

"Elizabeth is twenty," Mrs. Sullivan said as her carriage jounced along the country lanes that were muddy from a recent snowfall. "She is very pretty, although a trifle spoiled, I fear. Letty has been indulgent with her because of the loss of her parents. Now Letty must see her through the sort of doings that involve a young woman who is seeking to marry. I daresay she may seem a trifle immature to you, but I hope that you will be tolerant of her. She could use a friend."

And so could you, Mrs. Sullivan thought but did not add the comment. Clara had consented to join her grandmother when she went calling. It was apparent that she did so not out of an interest in the local activities which occupied the interests of the village gentry whose lives, through marriage and business, were interwoven with one another, but because she felt that she ought to do so. The afternoon when Clara had succumbed to raging cries of grief had left her weary and depleted, but her grandmother's candid words had not gone away when her tears were dry.

Clara knew that her grandmother had seen more than her fair share of sorrow in her seventy years. She had gone for many years childless and had finally, in later years, been blessed with children. They were all gone and only Clara, her sole grandchild, remained. Clara realized that she had never thought of the sorrow that her grandmother had endured. Grandmother was right. She had been selfish in her sadness. Grandmother had always been her source of strength and she owed it to the kindly woman to at least try to rise above the terrible weight of despair that threatened to overwhelm her.

She did not want to call upon the Fields. She remembered Elizabeth from her visits to her grandmother as a child; Elizabeth was a petulant child who had always wanted her own way. She had been that way before the death of her parents and it was likely, Clara

suspected, that she had not changed. Still, as she was living in her grandmother's home now, she owed it to her to join her in the calls which were a constant in the life of the village women.

"Is she being courted by any of the young men?" Clara asked.

It was the obvious question even though Clara did not really care whether Elizabeth had a beau or not. The merriment of courtship and the delights of falling in love, experiences which had brought her such joy when she was sharing them with Tom, seemed to belong to another woman named Clara, a stranger who had welcomed each day with gladness because the morning began with a kiss from Tom after a night spent in his loving arms. How odd it was to think that she and that vivacious, outgoing woman were the same.

She longed to be back in her grandmother's house, alone in her bedroom, writing in her diary, where she poured out her pained thoughts upon the pages. She felt most alive then, when she could allow herself to indulge, through her diary, in what amounted to a re-enactment of dying, day after day. It was all that engrossed her now that living itself was a burden. But she had to accept that her grandmother was no longer young and life, as Clara had already discovered, was precarious. It would be easier to give way to despair and let death claim her, but she could not subject her grandmother to that.

And so here they were entering the house where Letty Field and her granddaughter lived, handing their cloaks to the butler and being announced to Letty, who rose from her chair to greet them, giving Clara a kiss on the cheek and a pat on the back as if she could transmit her sympathy more readily than she could voice it.

"We are planning a supper," Letty told them. "Elizabeth is determined to serve a meal that will rival anything that the Prince Regent serves at his table."

Elizabeth, who was sitting at the escritoire and had not risen when Mrs. Sullivan and Clara entered, frowned. "Gran," she said, sounding as if she were scolding, "I do not wish to serve a meal that makes us seem as if we are rustics. I am inviting friends from London, you know, and they are used to elegance. We are not

capable of offering them the hospitality to which they are accustomed, but that is no reason to behave as if we are yokels.” Dipping her quill in the inkwell, she went on writing as if the guests were for her grandmother to address.

“If they’re hungry, they’ll eat,” Letty Field said bluntly. “A good meal in the cold winter does wonders to warm a body and for my money, a bowl of barley soup and a warm piece of fresh bread surpass all the fine cooking that might be served on a London table.”

“Really, Gran, I do hope you won’t say such things when my guests are here. Annabella Jerome and her brother are members of the ton, you know and I hope that you will not embarrass me in their presence.”

“I shall endeavor not to embarrass you at all,” Letty said with a twinkle in her eye. Lowering her voice, she whispered to Mrs. Sullivan and Clara as they sat down, “I’m tempted to adopt a corncob pipe and smoke it, just to startle them.”

The thought was so outlandish that, to her surprise, Clara burst out with a laugh. Elizabeth looked up and scowled. “Please,” she said in a pained voice, “I am trying to concoct a menu that will not strain Cook’s meager abilities and I do not wish to be distracted.”

Chastened, Clara fell silent. Mrs. Sullivan, annoyed that Elizabeth’s rudeness had brought a halt to the first spontaneous expression of mirth she had seen Clara give way to, was not cowed. “If you would like,” she said in a clear, ringing voice that easily carried to the corner of the room where Elizabeth sat, “I would be glad to lend you Mrs. Lindsay.”

“A village cook can hardly be expected to prepare foods which would tempt the sophisticated palates of the beau monde,” Elizabeth said coldly.

“Oh, did I not tell you, Bessie?” Letty inquired, her lips quirking with amusement. “Mrs. Lindsay was formerly a cook in Lady Cowper’s household. Martha was so lucky to snatch her up when she decided to leave London because she felt the country air would be better for her. I believe that Her Ladyship continues to communicate with her and sends her a Christmas present every year

, does she not?"

"Lady Cowper was most bereft to lose Mrs. Lindsay," Mrs. Sullivan confirmed with a smile of appreciation for her friend's behavior. "But she understood her reasons. She told Mrs. Lindsay that, after all these years, she has not yet found a cook who can duplicate the way she prepared deviled kidneys. I am sure that Mrs. Lindsay would be agreeable to helping in the kitchen if you wish to avail yourself of a cook with genuine London experience."

Elizabeth rose from her chair. "I am going to work in the library where I will not be interrupted," she said.

"Bessie, dear, why don't you take Clara with you? Clara was a great reader when she was a girl and I think you will find something to divert you. There is a new novel out that is simply splendid. It is called *Sense and Sensibility* and I think you will enjoy it. Only fancy, she titles herself A Lady. No one knows who the author is, of course, but I do hope she will write more."

"No one cares who she is," Elizabeth countered. "The silliness of women thinking that they can write novels is simply absurd. She is likely a vapid village woman aping her betters. Very well, Clara, if you wish to accompany me to the library, you may do so. I only ask that you remain silent as I must concentrate on my menu."

"I am accustomed to reading in silence," Clara answered, her voice slightly barbed. She had no interest in reading a novel and even less interest in Elizabeth Field's menu, but she could not remain in the drawing room when Letty clearly wanted to be alone so that she and Grandmother could chat. It was equally obvious that Elizabeth Field had gained nothing in comportment since her childhood and was as disagreeable as ever. At least the library offered the comfort of a refuge where she could pretend to be occupied in reading and would not be expected to conduct a conversation, Elizabeth having made it quite clear that she did not welcome Clara's society or discourse.

A Preference for Solitude

"I would rather visit a cell in Newgate Prison than call upon Elizabeth Field again!" Clara declared over dinner that night. "Elizabeth Field is overbearing and arrogant and I think she believes that everyone who lives in the village of Lennington must be a complete lack wit. Do you know that she told me three times that Anthony Jerome is accounted quite the whip in London? As if I or anyone else in the village cares how Mr. Jerome handles a horse!"

Mrs. Sullivan noticed that the wedge of pigeon pie on Clara's plate was half eaten. Ire agreed with her granddaughter's appetite, at any rate.

"I suppose she has set her cap for him," Mrs. Sullivan said, offering Clara the bowl of vegetables.

Engrossed in her topic, Clara spooned a helping onto her plate, barely aware of what she was doing. Mrs. Sullivan watched with satisfaction but did not comment lest Clara decide not to eat more.

"She is exasperating; I don't know how Mrs. Field endures her."

"She loves her, of course," Mrs. Sullivan answered wryly. "Elizabeth is her granddaughter, and except for Matthew, all she has left of family. You likely do not remember Matthew," she said, her eyes on her plate as she buttered her bread. "He practices law in London. I believe he is coming to Lennington to help Letty with legal matters. Perhaps you will meet him. I do not know what Elizabeth expects from her cook, but I must say that no one can rival Mrs. Lindsay's rolls. Do have one dear, the butter is delicious."

Clara accepted the offer. As she buttered her roll, she went on. "I am not going calling with you to the Fields again, Grandmother. I will not endure another afternoon of such insufferable arrogance."

"There are other calls to make," Mrs. Sullivan said mildly. "We can

visit other friends, and when Letty calls, she comes alone. I fear that Elizabeth does not deign to call upon us village yokes." Her tone indicated that she found Elizabeth's depiction of country residents to be amusing rather than insulting.

"Letty is a dear," Clara said. "But I feel aggrieved that she is saddled with such a granddaughter and I hope that I have never spoken to you as Elizabeth does to her grandmother."

"You never have, my dear," Mrs. Sullivan assured her. "Because you were never of that disposition and because neither your mother when she was alive nor I now would tolerate such a tongue. Letty loves her granddaughter but I do wonder if part of her zeal to engage Elizabeth in activities is so that she will find a husband and marry away from Lennington."

Clara laughed. "Grandmother, how cynical you are."

"Not at all. Why don't you have some of Mrs. Lindsay's jam on your bread, my dear? She has such a way with jams and I declare she can coax flavor out of any fruit that she picks. That's it, heap it on; the bread is well able to stand it."

When Clara retired for the night to her bedroom, she took out her diary as usual and prepared to write her thoughts about Tom. However, the quill remained in her hand as she thought of how Tom would have responded to Elizabeth, and she smiled as she thought of her late husband. He was the kindest and most thoughtful of men, and no doubt he would have been the same to Elizabeth. He detested pomposity, though. What would he have said in response to some of her more outrageous comments? They had lived quietly during the months of their marriage as Tom turned his attention to the small farm where he and Clara had lived. He was not a man of great means, but an inheritance from his grandfather and the farm had been enough for the two of them to live on.

If only there had been a child . . . Clara thought forlornly. They had hoped but nothing had come of it, and after Tom fell ill, there was no longer reason to hope. The illness, which the doctors had never been able to diagnose, although one had suggested that perhaps he had contracted something during his childhood in India which had returned when he was an adult, had struck in stealth. She had

watched him grow steadily more weak as time passed, until he was completely bedridden.

How she missed him. Even when he was so weak that he could no longer feed himself, she had sat at his bedside and fed him herself. She had still had him and they had talked. Or, rather, she had talked, determinedly cheerful and hopeful, as he listened and smiled, his eyes closed.

“Tom,” she wept, whispering his name and missing him so terribly that it seemed as if nothing would alleviate the dreadful emptiness created by his absence. They had been so much in love. Their friends had envied them the inseparable bond they shared. What did those friends think now? Did they pity her for having expended so great a volume of love into a marriage that had prematurely ended? Did others feel that, though their marital ties might be less strong, at least they were alive? Would she and Tom have been better off had they loved less?

Clara buried her face in her hands and cried. The day’s events, so frivolous and without significance, seemed to belong to another life. What did it matter if Elizabeth Field resorted to patronizing comments in her efforts to establish herself as a woman of sophistication? What did village calls matter when there was no one that she wanted to see but her husband? What did anything matter at all? For a few hours she had been distracted by the vanity of a frivolous young woman with a venomous tongue. She would have been better served had she simply stayed home as she would have preferred to do.

She was done with making calls. Grandmother would simply have to understand that she was not ready to rejoin the social round of calling and engagements. It was too soon, much too soon. She would continue to live quietly as she observed her mourning period. Surely Grandmother would understand.

Or would she? Did the memory of love fade? Had Grandmother, in her grief, ever soaked the bed linens with her tears? Had she been tormented by wonderful dreams in which her loved ones were alive, only to awaken to the truth and the loss that the day delivered? She dreamed of Tom so often. Sometimes he was ill, as he had been, but other times, he was strong and healthy, a vigorous young man with

a smile that burst forth like sunlight on a cloudy day, his eyes intent upon her.

That was how it had been once they met each other. There had been no one else. She had just left the schoolroom and he was not much older. He had obtained a commission in the army but his father's path was not for him and he had decided against a military career. His father had been disappointed, but there was the farm, which had been in the family for generations. With Tom's death, the farm was once again the property of the Andrews family. Major Andrews had given it to a nephew to run.

They had been so happy there. But the farm was gone. Tom was gone. She was left to live out her days with nothing to hope for and nothing to anticipate except the time when she could join her husband for eternity. Pray God, it would not be long to wait.

The Call is Returned

“Yes? What is it?”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am, but Mrs. Sullivan asks if you’ll please come downstairs. The Field’s are calling, ma’am.”

Clara put down her diary. Her grandmother had been amenable when Clara affirmed the day after they had called upon Letty and Elizabeth that she would never do so again. But now the Fields had come here to return the call and apparently her grandmother thought that she should be willing to greet them as guests since they were in her home. Why could people not leave her alone?

“Very well, Millicent. I will come downstairs shortly.”

Clara studied her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes had circles underneath them, but they were no longer red from the crying that she had done the night before, when sleep would not come and memories of Tom assailed her. Her pale golden hair, that Tom had loved to brush, was pulled back into a severe bun at the base of her neck. Her black mourning dress seemed oversized for her frail frame. Had she lost so much weight since Tom’s death? It didn’t matter. She was in mourning and what she wore and how she looked wearing it were matters of complete insignificance. If Elizabeth Field wished to make inane comments about Clara’s appearance, she was welcome to do so.

She put her diary away and descending the staircase, entered the drawing room where her grandmother was entertaining Letty and Elizabeth Field. There was another caller present, a young man who looked to be about the age that Tom would have been, who rose to his feet when she came into the room.

Mrs. Sullivan made the introductions. “Clara, dear, I don’t believe you and Matthew Field have met?”

Clara inclined her head. “I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Field,” she

greeted him.

“And I you, Mrs. Andrews,” he returned, sitting down again after she seated herself at her grandmother’s side.

The topic of conversation was the upcoming supper that Elizabeth was hosting in another week. She was cross with her brother because he apparently had no intention of joining the assembly.

“I shall be short a gentleman, Matthew, and you could at least make up the numbers, even if you are not so forthcoming as to be amiable,” his sister told him.

Unperturbed, Matthew Field simply shook his head. “I’m no good at it, Bessie,” he said. “When we were at Oxford, Tom always used to say—I say, Mrs. Andrews,” he interrupted himself, “would Tom Andrews have been your husband?”

Surprised by the reference to Tom, Clara said, “I suppose it is a common name, but Tom was at Oxford.”

Matthew grinned. “He and I were friends. He was a wonderful man. I don’t suppose I have to tell you that, though. I’m very sorry to learn of your loss. There are few enough good men in the world and fewer still who could match Tom in heart.”

Her grandmother looked at Clara anxiously, fearing that the subject of her late husband would be too much for Clara to endure, but to her surprise, Clara found her spirits lift. Here was someone who had known Tom and liked him.

“Yes,” she said, smiling “That was Tom. He never seemed to mind how foolish people could be. He found their foibles to be entertaining and he never had a sharp word for anyone.”

Matthew slapped his thigh in agreement. “That was Tom! When the two of us would retire to a pub after a hard day’s studying, he was ever engaged in the study of the people around us. He never condescended to them and was as likely to include the stable lad in conversation as he would speak to a don. I don’t think he ever noticed differences in people’s station in life.”

“No,” Clara said, her smile wide as she recalled her husband’s egalitarian nature. “He was wont to say that, as he made his living

as a farmer, he was as good and as bad as Adam and got his hands just as dirty. There was nothing of the snob about him."

"An admirable trait," Letty said with a meaningful glance at her granddaughter "We are all Adam's descendants and we all have known dirty hands although many of us pretend otherwise."

"I hardly think that one's genealogy need be traced back so far," Elizabeth declared "It's very well to acknowledge that we have ancestors of whom we are not entirely proud, but we needn't talk of it."

"Indeed not!" Matthew agreed with such zeal that Clara was surprised. Was this the man who had befriended her Tom? But Matthew's next words absolved him of haughtiness. "We all come from a man and his wife who went about in a natural state until they had the decency to attire themselves in fig leaves! A blot on the family escutcheon for sure. And that business with the serpent" he wagged his finger in warning. "Not to be spoken of, to be sure."

"You are not attending to me," Elizabeth said in a shrill voice.

"Bessie," her brother said patiently, "I should be ill-suited for your gathering. I have no witty banter or frothy comments to whisper in a young lady's ear; I'm but a fair rider and I spend my days working and not cantering on Rotten Row; and moreover, for all that I know of Anthony Jerome, he would be better suited to paying his debts and spending less of his uncle's money or there will be no inheritance left."

Elizabeth glared at him. "How can you speak so of him?"

"Because I know him," her brother told her calmly. "We were at school together, and he was forever borrowing a fiver off us. Tom had a soft heart and would often make him the loan, but I was more skeptical that I would ever see the funds again. Which turned out to be true; Tom never was repaid. A man who cannot pay a small debt is unlikely to repay a large one. Remember your Bible lessons."

"I'm speaking of a supper, not a sermon," Elizabeth retorted.

"It would serve Anthony Jerome well were he to listen to more sermons and attend fewer suppers," was her brother's response.

“He’s looking for a rich wife to absorb his debts. So that he may incur more, of course.”

“I think you’re perfectly horrid to speak so unkindly of Mr. Jerome. I met him when I stayed with Annabella over a school holiday several years ago and he was most engaging.”

‘

“No doubt,” Matthew said. “But that doesn’t make him a chap I’d welcome as a brother-in-law.”

Clara sensed that Matthew was alerting his headstrong sister that even if Anthony Jerome did ask for permission to court her. Matthew would not grant it. It was apparent that he knew more of the young man than he intended to share with the ladies, but her intuition told her that he was warning his sister that her choice was an unwise one which would not be met with approval. His manner was the sort that Tom would have applied as well; never one to be heavy-handed in his ways, Tom did not skirt unpleasant facts but he took no joy in delivering bad news.

Mrs. Sullivan, likely sharing her granddaughter’s intuition, deftly turned the topic of the supper back to the subject of the menu. It was a successful ploy which allowed Elizabeth to boast that she had settled upon choices for the meal which would satisfy the London palates without challenging the cook’s repertoire. Elizabeth was dismissive of any notion that cooking required skill.

“All she need do is follow the receipt,” she said in exasperation. “Cook can read, can she not?”

“So I should assume,” Letty replied, “as she seems to understand my notations readily enough, and certainly can interpret the accounts on the bills when they arrive and I question her. But cookery is a skill, my dear. I own that I am glad I was never required to do my own cooking, for I fear my family should have starved. Only recall what Mrs. Sullivan told us last week of the Lady Cowper’s longing for Mrs. Lindsay’s skill with deviled kidneys.”

“Deviled kidneys will not be on the menu,” Elizabeth announced in frigid tones.

“Pity,” her brother said. “They’re so tasty. Popular, too. But never

mind, Bessie. It's the company and the conversation which make a meal enjoyable. Mrs. Andrews, Tom and I and a group of friends spent hours discussing politics over humble fare at the local taverns and I've rarely enjoyed a meal as much as I did those, although to be sure, we were generally short of ready cash and dined, often as not, on bread and cheese. Tom was a rare one for debating, you know. He could see all sides of an argument."

"Yes," Clara recalled. "It was quite aggravating at times. He would take the opposite side of a discussion, I recall, merely to goad me."

Matthew smiled. "That sounds very like him. It is he who should have gone into the law. But it held no interest for him. He said he didn't want to be responsible for presenting facts in a courtroom which could put a noose around a man's neck. He did not dispute that the noose would be, in most cases, well deserved. It was the ones who were innocent and were hanged because they hadn't the money to defend themselves that troubled him."

Befriending Tom's Friend

When it was time for the Fields to leave, Matthew Field approached Clara as the other ladies were bidding farewells. "I hope that I did not cause you distress," he said, an earnest expression on his genial face, "by speaking of Tom. We were great friends and I knew that he had married but I did not connect him with your family. I am sure that he was a happy man in his choice."

"It was I who was the happy one," she said. "You have not distressed me. Speaking of Tom brings me great pleasure."

"I hope that we may do it again, then," he said. "I shall be at home with my grandmother throughout the winter, mostly on the weekends. She wishes to arrange her affairs."

"She is well, I trust?"

"Fit as a fiddle. But she is seventy now and wishes to ensure that her estate and possessions will be distributed fairly when she is no longer with us. My sister is, I fear, a trifle reckless in her decisions and Gran wishes to ensure that she will not be fleeced by a fortune hunter who breaks her heart and leaves her penniless."

"She is wise to do so," Clara said.

"I should very much enjoy calling upon you and Mrs. Sullivan when I am this way, if it would not cause you sadness. Tom's memory is very vivid to me, although we had lost touch over the years after school. I should like to recall those happy times."

"It would make me happy also, Mr. Field," she said to him warmly.

After they had left, instead of returning to her bedroom, Clara remained in the drawing room to write letters to friends. It was a task she had been putting off because their messages, although kindly meant, had been painful for her to read. But her spirits were buoyed by Mr. Field's warmhearted recollections of her husband

and she addressed the task with renewed spirit.

"Matthew Field is an engaging young man," her grandmother said. "He's much more charming than his sister."

"I fear that is to Elizabeth's loss," Clara agreed. "She would do better to heed his advice. I believe that, although he employs a cheerful countenance and appears to speak in jest, he will be more stiff of spine when it comes to approving his sister's marriage."

"Fancy that he and Tom were such friends," Mrs. Sullivan commented. "I had no idea. I suppose I would not have known, though. Letty spoke often of her grandson, but he of course was at school and living with his parents when they were alive, until he went to London to practice law."

"I suppose that, had Tom and I had a grand wedding, he would have been there. But as his parents could not leave India to come, Tom felt it would not be right to do so without them, and I was quite content with our wedding as it was." Clara smiled, recalling the day they were married. Tom, so serious and sincere as he repeated his vows; she smiling and confident, not at all the shy, retiring bride. It had been a happy day. They had been young, but they had been sure of their love. She had settled into her married life with aplomb, managing the household matters while Tom took care of the farm. It had not always been easy, but there had not been a single moment when either of them had regretted their decision to wed.

That night, she wrote in her diary,

Today I met a friend of Tom's from his days at Oxford. Mr. Field appears to be a man on honor and kindness, just the sort of man that Tom would have been friends with. Hearing him speak of those days, from a time when I did not know Tom, was so comforting. Tom is still gone, but in hearing those tales from Tom's youth, I feel as if he is not so far away from me tonight. I can see him in a tavern with his fellow students, arguing over politics and matters of conscience with all his compassion and nobility. Mr. Andrews confirmed what I have always known, and that is that Tom has always been one who stood out for his integrity. I shall look forward to further conversations with Mr. Field. It is apparent that he holds Tom in high esteem.

She fell asleep and spent a dreamless night but a restful one. Mrs. Sullivan commented on her appearance when Clara joined her downstairs in the morning room the next day.

"I did sleep well," Clara confirmed, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"The bacon is very crisp," Mrs. Sullivan said, "Mrs. Lindsay made quite a bit and I cannot possibly eat it all."

"I believe I will have some," Clara decided, going to the sideboard and placing strips of bacon on her plate. "It looks as if it's going to be a rather cold day today. I was hoping that Mullins would be able to cut some holly and pine so that we could decorate for Christmas. It will be very stark if we don't soon attend to it."

"Yes," Mrs. Sullivan said after a moment, taken aback by her granddaughter's reference to a subject which Mrs. Sullivan had avoided for fear of troubling Clara. "I am glad that you thought of it."

"Do you remember, Grandmother, how we used to drape holly around that bust of Caesar that Grandfather had in the library?" Clara laughed.

"I remember how your father would leave a glass of brandy for Caesar every Christmas Eve," Mrs. Sullivan reminisced. "He said that a man who had taken so many stab wounds would benefit from a medicinal draught on a holiday night."

"I had forgotten that," Clara marveled. "Papa had such amusing notions."

"Yes," Mrs. Sullivan agreed. "He was the opposite of your mother, of course. She was very serious and he was jovial. It was a good match."

"Papa always said that you treated him as if he were your own son."

"I felt that he was a son to me. He was such a good husband to your mother and she adored him. I was so pleased when I saw that same unity between you and Tom that was there between your mother and father."

Clara was silent and her grandmother wondered if she had been too

precipitous in mentioning the wedding of Tom and Clara. Then Clara said, "I wish Mother and Father could have known Tom. I think they would have regarded him as a son."

"I'm sure of it, my dear," Mrs. Sullivan said.

It was too soon to speak of Clara's youth and the likelihood that she would marry again, so that, one day, she would welcome a bride or groom into the family for her own child. Mrs. Sullivan knew that she would not be alive to see that day but it was in the future. She was sure of it. Matthew Field had made an excellent impression on Clara. True, she was not seeking a second husband and he had not conducted himself as a swain. Mrs. Sullivan had no doubt that his regard for his friend Tom Andrews was genuine. She also had no doubt that the young man was not unaware of Clara's blonde beauty and that it was within the realm of possibility that, when her time of official mourning ended, Matthew Field might present himself in another role. He was a young man but she deduced that he was a sensible sort. He would be a good husband, she thought. A woman could love again after she had loved once. Clara needed to find that out for herself.

"I wonder if we might not invite the Fields over during Christmas festivities," she suggested. "I believe that Letty would enjoy it, and perhaps Mrs. Lindsay will be able to devise some delicacies which will not bore poor Elizabeth too much,"

Clara laughed aloud. "I think that whatever we serve will be seen as provincial to Elizabeth but that is no reason not to invite them."

/"Then let's plan to do so," Mrs. Sullivan said. "Perhaps a dinner on the Saturday after Christmas? We shall invite them to spend the night and we shall attend services together."

"Then we should waste no time in preparing," Clara said. "I wonder if Mrs. Lindsay has begun her baking yet?"

"I shall instruct her to do so. Her mince pies might even persuade Elizabeth that though we rusticate in the country and do not cut a swatch in London, our palates do not suffer as a result."

"I had better finish my knitting," Clara said. "I believe the vicar wants to have everything ready to deliver before Christmas Eve."

“Yes,” Mrs. Sullivan said as she sipped her tea. “It’s likely to be a busy week ahead.”

The Holiday at Home

Mrs. Sullivan and Clara were surprised the following Saturday night when Hodges opened the door to the drawing room to announce that Mr. Matthew Field had come to call.

“Send him in, Hodges,” Mrs. Sullivan directed. “I wonder,” she said to Clara after Hodges left the room, “what on earth can bring him here in the evening. I hope that nothing is amiss. Letty seemed quite well when they called upon us.”

Matthew entered the room looking contrite but with mischievous blue eyes alight with mirth. “I am a refugee for the evening, ladies,” he announced as he approached them. “Tonight is my sister’s supper for her smart London set and rather than expose my rustic ways, I have abandoned my grandmother to throw myself upon her friends. I thank you for accepting me.”

“Of course, Matthew,” Mrs. Sullivan laughed. “You are always welcome here. Would you take some refreshment? Mrs. Lindsay has been baking for Christmas but I daresay she will relinquish a slice of her seed cake if I beg her. And perhaps a cup of tea or would you prefer a glass of something?”

“Tea and seed cake are just the thing,” he replied. “It’s a very cold night.” He walked to the fire and stood in front of it, spreading his hands out to receive its warmth.

“It is very uncharitable of you to leave your grandmother to such demanding guests,” Clara scolded him, but with an expression in her blue eyes which assured him that she meant no criticism. “I hope that they will be pleased with their meal.”

“People decide whether or not they will be pleased based on their natures,” he said, leaving the warmth of the fire to sit upon the chair in front of it. “If they are people of good character, they will be gracious. If they are not, no amount of cooking will render them

so. Bessie will need to learn this, but it is a hard lesson for a young girl who is determined to impress a stylish set of people who may be too full of their own selves to appreciate anything.”

“You sound like Tom,” Clara told him. “Although his father was an officer and Tom was welcome in any house in London because of Major Andrews’ position, he did not seek invitations to the fashionable set.”

Matthew leaned forward, his arms resting on his legs, his posture one of eagerness. He was a wiry young man, Mrs. Sullivan noticed, the kind of man who had a boundless supply of energy. Dark, unruly brown hair, lively brown eyes; not a fop, but not unaware of fashion, either. He dressed in the sober garb of a lawyer, but he was not likely to be famous for his tailor. . His sister Elizabeth had his coloring but not his demeanor. A ready smile and a cheerful disposition such as her brother had might have availed her well, Mrs. Sullivan thought. She listened as Clara and Matthew talked of Tom, Matthew recalling episodes from their years at Oxford that had Clara laughing so hard that tears streamed from her eyes. But they were happy tears, her grandmother discerned.

“I was ever the one who got into trouble for the scrapes that Tom concocted,” Matthew was saying. “For some reason, I always looked guilty and Tom, of course, looked as if he’d only just taken off his halo. Our boyhood was renowned for such things as that. Why, I recall when the vicar took me to task---“

“You and Tom were friends as children?” Clara asked him, fascinated by this revelation.

“Oh, yes. We shared a tutor. Tom didn’t grow up in India, you see. He was there during his childhood, of course. His parents sent him back to England once he was of school age. He lived with his uncle, and I went there for lessons until the two of us entered Harrow.”

“I knew that Tom lived with his uncle after he started school,” Clara agreed.

“Tom was the better student,” Matthew admitted. “I was too impatient for such dull things as lessons. Tom was the better at Latin and he helped me with my translations. He was doing that all through our Oxford years. As I said, the professors were puzzled

that he did not enter the academic field. He had a gift for learning.”

“Yes,” Clara agreed. “But he preferred being out of doors. He sought to be a farmer because it would be his life’s work to be out all day. He was so enthusiastic about the crops. I recall how, before we were married, he came to call and brought me the first parsnip from the garden. He was so very proud of it and I hadn’t the heart to tell him that I do not care for parsnips.”

Matthew laughed. “That sounds like Tom. He was ever growing things. Our rooms at Oxford always had plants growing in the most unlikely containers. He thought nothing of taking a teacup, putting soil in it, planting a seed and letting it grow on the windowsill.”

“He did that when we were married as well,” Clara nodded. “He was like a child, really; he thought the growth of a plant to be a miracle that never grew dull.”*

“Even if it was but a parsnip,” Matthew said, grinning.

“Of course I instructed—do you recall, Grandmother?—Mrs. Lindsay to serve it for dinner, and nothing would do but Tom must stay the night with us. And she served it up. Tom was so grateful to her. He never saw her as only a servant; she cooked the first fruits of his harvest and so she was his benefactor. He was unique . . . “ her voice trailed off and a tremulous note had entered when she continued. “There is no one like him.”

Matthew did not dispute this. “I wish there were more like him. He’s the sort of chap that I would gladly see my sister married to.”

“She seems to be quite intrigued by this Anthony Jerome.”

“He’s a bounder,” Matthew said gloomily. “Debts, bad friends, the usual vices of the smart set. Bessie doesn’t see that. She sees the flash. But flash is no good for marriage. She won’t listen to me when I caution her. I suppose younger sisters don’t like to be told what manner of man they ought to marry.”

“You are the male relative in charge of the family,” Mrs. Sullivan pointed out. “Surely that gives you some authority.”

“That is why Gran has asked me to come ‘round on weekends, so that I can firm up her financial dealings and make sure that, should

Bessie run off to Gretna Green and elope with a cad like Jerome, he won't be able to pluck her like a Christmas goose. And, speaking of Christmas, Gran and I will be delighted to accept your kind invitation to dine the Saturday after Christmas. Bessie won't be with us; she's going off to London after Christmas to stay with friends."

Clara supposed it was unkind of her but she was relieved that Elizabeth would not be joining them for dinner. Letty was always delightful to be with and Matthew's friendship with Tom made him a welcome guest, but Elizabeth so plainly did not enjoy company she deemed as provincial that it was no pleasure to host her. Clara's spirits rose as she contemplated the holidays. It would be hard to bear without Tom, but at least she would have the anticipation of talking about him when Mr. Field came to dine with them and that would be a Christmas present far greater than she would have expected.

It was truly a blessing, she thought later that night after Mr. Field had bid them farewell and she and Grandmother had retired to their beds, that he was spending time with his grandmother to see to her legal affairs. His knowledge of Tom fed a hunger in her that had threatened to become ravenous, so eager was she to speak of him and think of him. She could not undo his death, but by learning about his youth and his schooldays, she was able to cling, just a bit, to the past, where he was yet among the living.

A Present from Tom

It was pleasant to see a smile on her granddaughter's face, Mrs. Sullivan thought as they sat down to their Christmas dinner. Although Clara had not shown the exuberant glee that she had displayed in happier times, she had been genuinely grateful, her grandmother thought, to receive the presents that she had been given. Mrs. Sullivan was touched by the journal that Clara gave to her. In it, Clara had written a book of memories, recalling happy Christmases under her grandmother's roof, as well as time when sadness had struck the family and it had been her grandmother's love that had made the difference.

Clara apologized for the gift being so humble. "I have not been of a mind to go shopping," she said.

Mrs. Sullivan's worn hands caressed the journal. "You could not have bought something like this," she said. "And nothing in a shop could mean as much. Now," she said briskly, as she felt her eyes watering with the tears from memories drawn from the well of past holidays, when the dining room chairs had been filled with family, "let us go in and do justice to the goose that Mrs. Lindsay has prepared."

Clara smiled. "I am looking forward to it," she said. The truth was that Clara had not slept well the night before, thinking of the Christmas the previous year when Tom had just begun to fall ill but before they understood that, his illness would be fatal. They had been happy, staying up late talking, planning their future and expressing their hopes for the year ahead. A family, more acreage plowed, more livestock . . . such ordinary wishes, and yet they had been denied.

The night had been haunted with grief but Clara refused to surrender to it. It would not be fair, she thought, to allow her own sadness to ruin the day for her grandmother, who had her own sad

memories. Grandmother was old, and the holidays remaining to her were diminishing. Therefore, Clara arose with a determination that she would greet Christmas morning as if her joy in it were sincere.

Mrs. Lindsay had outdone herself with her cooking and both ladies declared themselves too full to look at any more food. But that declaration was ignored when the mince pie was served.

"I hope that Mrs. Lindsay made several of these," Clara said as she swallowed a forkful of the pie. "I think the Fields will enjoy them on Saturday."

"I confess that I am looking forward to hearing about Elizabeth's supper and how it went. I wonder if the dubious Mr. Jerome has requested permission to call upon Elizabeth."

"He would need to ask Mr. Field, and as we know, Mr. Field was not there to ask. I wonder if that was deliberate?"

"Matthew seems to be a very shrewd young man. He is fond of his sister but, unlike Letty, he does not appear to be swayed by her."

"It must be difficult to be the head of the household at such a young age. He can only be five-and-twenty or so, and as a single man with no household of his own, I wonder how he manages to assume a parental role to his sister. I should not think she welcomes his interference."

"Particularly when Letty has let her have her way in so many things. Elizabeth is so very headstrong that she is quite likely to make an unwise decision regarding her future. I do not think that Matthew's fears of an elopement are unfounded. If Mr. Jerome has the character that Matthew has described—and I think we must infer that as a lawyer, he would not speak so if he did not have facts upon which to base his claims—he would not shrink from persuading Elizabeth to marry despite her brother's refusal to allow it. "

"It's all very different from when Tom and I were married. You were delighted with him and there was never any doubt that he was a fine man who would make a fine husband."

"Never a moment's doubt, my dear. I think it has been a blessing, as well, to learn that Matthew, who knew Tom before you did,

vouches for his character during a time when young men are won to be somewhat wild in their activities.”

“I don’t doubt that Tom got into the sort of scrapes which a student would be prone to,” Clara smiled fondly. “He was never a prim sort of man. But he was always kind to others and whatever he managed to do, there was never meanness or malice in him. It has been very rewarding to speak with Mr. Field about Tom.”

The conversation turned to plans for the Saturday dinner that they were hosting. Because of the long friendship between Mrs. Sullivan and Letty Field, and because Matthew Field had been a friend of Tom from years before, it felt as if they were welcoming members of their own family. Anticipating the opportunity to learn more about Tom as a young man, Clara was actually merry as she trimmed the holly that decorated the dining room.

Despite her mourning, she had overseen the decorating, not wanting her grandmother to be deprived of the festive nature of Christmas. Greenery abounded, draped upon the mantel and on the window sills, with sprigs of holly brightening up the room wherever Clara could find a place for them. She brushed away a tear as she recalled the previous Christmas when Tom, after everyone had gone to bed on Christmas Eve, had silently gone downstairs to hang mistletoe throughout the rooms., even though he was not feeling well. He had found numerous opportunities to kiss his wife, and also his grandmother-in-law. Dear Tom . . . he enlivened every event with his irrepressible good humor.

“Mrs. Field and Mr. Matthew Field, ma’am,” Hodges announced their guests.

“Send them in, Hodges; we shall visit for a bit while Mrs. Lindsay and the staff finish preparing the meal.”

Letty Field was dressed in holiday elegance, with fur trimming along the collar of her gown. Matthew, ever the lawyer, was still as sartorially sober as always, but he had chosen a pine green waistcoat to observe the holiday. Mrs. Sullivan, too, had dressed in her finery, wearing a silver-gray dress that, despite its simplicity, added to the atmosphere of celebration. Clara was in mourning and would not have been expected to vary her wardrobe, but her smile

as she greeted their guests was, Mrs. Sullivan thought, decorative all on its own.

“Elizabeth could not join us,” Letty apologized.

“Yes, Matthew explained that she was visiting friends in London after Christmas.”

“Bessie is at home sulking, and not in London,” Matthew explained, “because the friends she planned to visit are the Jeromes and as I denied Anthony Jerome’s request to pay court to my sister, I also rescinded her acceptance of the invitation to stay with them in London.”

“It appears that the Jerome household would have been inadequately chaperoned,” Letty explained, her voice troubled.

“Matthew learned that Mr. and Mrs. Jerome were remaining at their estate in the country over the holidays and would not be in the London house. Therefore, I said that Bessie could not go.”

“Certainly not!” Mrs. Sullivan agreed. “Nothing good could come of such an arrangement. I wonder that Mr. Jerome should have been a party to it.” Her eyes met those of her friend and the two old women exchanged a wordless sharing of their thoughts.

“Mr. Jerome will be a party to anything that will permit him to lay his covetous, debt-riddled hands upon my sister’s inheritance,” Matthew said frankly. He turned to Clara as Letty and Mrs. Sullivan began to speak to one another about the recklessness of young people who failed to observe the rules of propriety. “It is times such as these when I find myself thinking of Tom,” he said. “He was adept at delivering news which the recipient did not want to hear and yet he did so with such warmth that there was never a row. I remember a time when a member of our group was behaving in an ungentlemanly manner toward a young woman who assumed that his attentions to her were honorable.”

“They were not?” Clara questioned.

“She was the daughter of the tavern owner, and his intentions were decidedly dishonorable. But she was a respectable girl and thought that he intended marriage. Tom intervened before the girl had allowed herself to be ruined; our friend was not pleased at having

his amusement curtailed, but he could not dispute Tom's intervention."

"Tom had a very high regard for ladies," Clara nodded. "It's sometimes difficult for me to explain how honorable he was, and yet, he was not at all priggish."

Matthew chuckled. "No, indeed. No one had a more alert wit than Tom. In fact, it is that wit that I wish to recall. I hope you will not think me forward, but I have brought you something."

"But I have no gift for you!" she protested.

"This is not a gift from me," he said gently taking a book out of the pocket of his coat. "It is from Tom."

Angels Intent

Clara did not know how she had been able to refrain from leaving their guests to go to her bedroom so that she could savor the gift from Matthew. It was a book from Tom's days at Oxford in which he had written numerous notes, quips, and his thoughts on the tutor who was instructing the subject matter. Matthew explained that when he had packed up his belongings upon leaving Oxford, he had realized that he had mistakenly included one of Tom's books with his own.

Clara had hugged the book to her bosom. "Nothing could give me more joy," she had said to Matthew, "than to accept this from you."

"From Tom," Matthew corrected her.

The rest of the dinner had continued in mirth and merriment. Letty Field and Mrs. Sullivan had a wealth of stories of Christmases from their youth and Matthew teased them about their days as debutantes, when they were young and sought after. There was no disrespect in his raillery, only an affection for his grandmother that was apparent, and a regard for Mrs. Sullivan that was flattering. Matthew had a gift for mimicry and as the elderly women reminisced, he adopted the role of a peevish older man chiding them for their girlish follies. The ladies laughed in response as if they were transported back to their youth when they were entertaining the attentions of young men. It was all very amusing and enjoyable and Clara found herself laughing without reserve.

The meal that Mrs. Lindsay had prepared was up to her usual expert standards and Matthew declared that he intended to have two pieces of mince pie, which he proceeded to do. When the meal was finished, they returned to the drawing room for more conversation. Upon leaving, Letty said that she could not remember a more enjoyable evening, and her grandson agreed.

Mrs. Sullivan yawned after the Fields left. "I enjoyed myself very

much, and now I intend to go up to bed and sleep the sleep of the well fed and fattened." She smiled at Clara. "How thoughtful Matthew is, to think of that book from his schooldays and bring it to you."

"Yes, he's very thoughtful," Clara said. "It will be as if I am sharing Christmas with Tom after all."

Clara dressed for bed and placed the candlestick on the nightstand beside her so that she could read. As she turned the pages, and read Tom's words, she found herself smiling. He was so evocative in his writing that it was as if she were conversing with him. He responded humorously of their tutor's habit of prefacing his lectures with warnings about the wickedness of young men. "Did I not tell you how wicked you are, my friend, for insisting that we must needs abstain from services in order to worship the trout in the streams because the Sunday was so fine? Be warned, your soul shall suffer for that indulgence and you shall surely reap the wrath of the clergy for your sins (It was however, very fine trout.) He wrote with eloquence about his love of the outdoors and his concern that the rise of manufacturing in England would bring with it perils which the country's leaders were ill-prepared to perceived. "In their eyes, England is turf," he wrote, "suitable for Rotten Row or fox hunting. They fail to see that it is the land that nurtures our souls in a way that factories never can. I fear for the people who work in such places; robbed of the good air and enslaved by wages which will not recompense them for their labor, they will find themselves oppressed while those who own the factories thrive."

As she turned each page, she was heartened by the manner in which Tom's words restored him to her. This was a side of Tom that was unknown to her until now and she had Matthew Field to thank for it. How fortuitous that, years ago, he had included one of Tom's books with his own as he packed his belongings upon graduation, so that she would be able to enjoy it now. It was, she thought as she doused the candle and nestled deeper underneath the bed covers, nothing less than a benison from the angels intent on proving that God had not forgotten her on this Christmas without Tom.

The weekend visits from Matthew continued throughout the winter. Mrs. Sullivan, wiser and worldlier than her young granddaughter, guessed that Matthew Field, although certainly assiduous in his

duty to his grandmother as he worked with her to prepare her financial affairs for the day when she was no longer with them, perceived that his weekly calls were not merely so that Clara could reminisce about her late husband and learn more about his youth before they were married. Matthew never once indicated in any way that his calls were solely to see Clara, but Mrs. Sullivan frequently found reasons to leave the room on a household matter so that the pair could converse. As a widow, Clara was not in need of vigilant chaperonage, and Matthew was the epitome of a gentleman, giving Mrs. Sullivan no reason to fear leaving them alone. She knew that her granddaughter had no thoughts of remarrying, and it was still too soon after Tom's death for her to do so, but Mrs. Sullivan, from the wealth of her own years, knew that eventually, the yearnings of youth would reclaim her. It would be easier for this to happen with the presence of a young, personable, eminently marriageable young man in proximity.

Winter would end, Mrs. Sullivan reasoned, and as the earth returned to life, she was hopeful that her granddaughter would as well. There would be no forgetting the love of a husband, Mrs. Sullivan knew that well enough from her own happy marriage which had given her many years with Clara's grandfather. It was natural to cling to a happy time, but life would press its case.

Spring would come and green would return; the creatures of the woods would bear their young, the gardens would show the profit of the planting, the birds would sing, the flowers would blossom. And a young woman who was too young to be a widow, and far too young to remain so, would, Mrs. Sullivan prayed, be able to leave behind the ways of mourning to embrace the new days ahead.

Unaware of her grandmother's thoughts, Clara looked forward to Matthew's visits with no reckoning of anything but their mutual affection for Tom. There were times when memories brought tears to her eyes but Matthew—he had become Matthew, rather than Mr. Field, over the course of the winter, when it seemed foolish to regard him in formal terms when, as she said to her grandmother, who agreed, he had become so much a part of their circle that it was as if they had always known

him—was unfailingly understanding at such times, and he produced his handkerchief without a word. She would dry her eyes and

apologize, but he simply shook his head. "You love him," he said.

That he used the present and not the past tense endeared him to Clara. Others spoke of Tom as if he were no longer a part of her life. They were wrong. Although he was no longer present physically, he was never out of her thoughts. When she missed him the most, she would take the book that Matthew had given her, and read from it so that she could replenish her memories.

One day, when winter seemed as though it was releasing its frigid hold upon the land, Matthew suggested that they take a stroll in the garden. "It's a fine day," he said, adding with a smile that revealed a dimple in the corner of his cheek, 'for a day in March, in England. The birds are quite intoxicated; you shall see them taking flight as if they had thrown off winter entirely."

Clara laughed and donned her cloak. He was correct, it was surprisingly fair. Although the sky had not yet been restored to blue, there was a hint of sunshine above and a feeling of warmth that had been absent for so long. He was correct in his observation of the birds; they took flight with a soaring pleasure in the renewed warmth of the day, the sun on their wings again.

"I am looking forward to gardening," Clara admitted. "It reminds me of Tom. Do you know, I was so surprised to see parsnips growing. Mrs. Lindsay brought them to my attention; she said they spend the winter underground and after the frost, they will sweeten."

"I thought you did not care for parsnips," Matthew teased her.

"Nor do I, but they make me think of Tom, and I count on Mrs. Lindsay to prepare them in such a way that I may honor his memory without being required to honor the parsnip in its original flavor."

Matthew laughed. "I account the parsnip to be an admirable vegetable, but it's not, I confess, one of my favorites. A garden will be a pleasant pastime for you, I think."

"Yes." As they strolled, Clara breathed in the fresh air. It held a hint of spring, as if the dirt itself was seasoned by the invisible harbingers of the movement in the calendar, which promised

renewal. Tom had loved spring; it was his favorite time of year, Gardening would bring her closer to him.

"I wonder," Matthew said, sounding hesitant as Clara stopped to examine a plant that had started to emerge from the dirt, eager to begin anew with the milder air spurring it on.

"Hm?" Tom was a farmer and it was vegetables that he planted, but Clara thought that it would be pleasing to have her own flower garden on the side of the house by her window. Roses, of course; a rose bush would waft its fragrance every morning.

"Clara," Matthew said.

"Yes? What is it, Matthew?"

"I wonder . . . that is . . . do you ever think of your life when you are out of mourning?"

"No," she answered, surprised by the question. "I cannot conceive of being out of mourning because I shall always miss Tom."

"Yes, of course you will . . . I understand that . . . but I wonder if there will ever come a time when you might think of marrying again?"

Matthew was unused to hesitating in his speech. He was a lawyer and he knew how to pose his arguments convincingly so that every word, syllable, pause was intentional. But as Clara's large, lovely blue eyes stared back at him, he found speech deserting him.

"No," she said. "No, I do not."

He could not leave it there. "It's simply that I have come to have feelings for you and I had hopes that perhaps, in time, those

feelings might be returned---Clara, please, don't run away!"

But Clara, gathering up her skirts, had raced from the garden, running away from him as if her very life depended upon escaping him. Startled by the suddenness of her movement, the birds left the trees and sought refuge elsewhere.

Tom Speaks

"It seems that Matthew has returned to London for good," Mrs. Sullivan disclosed several weeks later during tea.

"I suppose he finished his business with his grandmother and now that everything is in order, he had no reason to stay."

"Perhaps," Mrs. Sullivan said, eyeing her granddaughter thoughtfully. "But it's very odd that he did not stop by to bid farewell. Most unlike him, I should have thought. Did he tell you good-bye?"

"No, he did not. I suppose that he has taken care of matters so that Letty need not fear Elizabeth making a foolish marriage. "

Clara tried to change the subject. She did not want her grandmother's discerning scrutiny to unearth any more about Matthew's departure from Lennington than she already knew. The truth was that Matthew's precipitous leave-taking had left Clara in a confused state. When he first revealed his feelings, she had been horrified by his words. How could he ruin their friendship by suggesting that she would ever forget Tom? That she would ever, could ever, conceive of the thought of being another man's wife? It was a betrayal of her marriage to think so and it was also a betrayal of the friendship between Matthew and Clara that had brought her such comfort. For Matthew, who had spoken so warmly of his regard for Tom, who had given her his handkerchief to drive her tears with when memories brought forth tears, to violate the sanctity of her vows and her trust in him was egregious.

The days after the incident in the garden, she spent more time in her room, explaining to her grandmother that with the anniversary of Tom's death approaching, she found herself unequal to the task of going on as if everything were normal.

Mrs. Sullivan, although she privately thought that Tom's death in

summer hardly warranted advance anniversary grieving in March, did not share her thoughts, but she wondered whether something had happened. Had Matthew declared himself, only to be rejected by Clara? If so, it was a shame, Mrs. Sullivan thought. Matthew would make a good husband and Clara was young.

"A young woman like Elizabeth is likely to make a foolish marriage no matter what. I should think that Matthew has tied matters up as best he can so that a fortune hunter will not be able to wrest her inheritance from her and leave her penniless. But he cannot rescue her from a broken heart or shattered pride. I plan to call on Letty tomorrow. Will you join me?"

"No, I . . . there are the trunks of Tom's belongings that I need to go through. I put it off after he died because I couldn't bear to do it but I think I must steel myself for the task and begin."

Mrs. Sullivan nodded. "Yes, it's best to get something like that accomplished. It's not easy, my dear, but it needn't be tragic."

"What do you mean, Grandmother?" Clara asked in surprise. Was Grandmother criticizing her?

"I mean that it is a time for looking back and that is not unpleasant. It is true that the future is very different now, without Tom, but it still awaits you and you must be ready for it."

"You sound like---I am quite aware that the future is before me. I hope that you do not intend for me to hurtle into a second marriage. You did not remarry after Grandfather died."

"I was considerably older than you are now, my dear," her grandmother replied tartly, "and I had my children."

That was cruel, Clara thought and her cheeks flushed. She had no children. She had nothing of Tom but memories that she would cling to for the rest of her life. No one understood how she felt.

"I believe I will go and get started on the papers," she said coolly. "Please give Letty my regards when you see her. And Elizabeth as well, of course."

"Perhaps Elizabeth is glad that her brother has returned to London," Mrs. Sullivan said daringly. "I daresay she found his presence

confining.”

“Elizabeth is a very foolish girl,” Clara retorted.

“I agree,” was her grandmother’s calmly delivered answer. “And yet, girls are often foolish in their choices.”

Clara did not care for the shrewd expression in her grandmother’s eyes, so she bade her give Letty her regards and went upstairs to her room.

She had not been able, in the weeks after Tom’s death, to go through his belongings. Because the farm was to be left to his kinsman, Clara chose not to linger, and so she quickly packed Tom’s things and her own and returned to her grandmother’s house. The trunks had been placed in her room, constantly reminding her that she still had work to do with regard to Tom’s death.

It was time to do it now, she realized. She opened the small trunk first. In it, she had placed Tom’s papers. Many of them were of consequence to no one but her; the legal papers had already been processed. She sat at the desk by the window and pulled a stack of papers from the trunk.

She regretted now having packed so hastily. The papers were crumpled, the edges folded over. Before she could do anything, she needed to take them from the trunk and put them in order. As she was doing so, she noticed a crumpled piece of paper that had escaped her notice before. It looked to be something that Tom might have intended to discard. Clara smoothed out the paper.

It was a letter, she realized as she saw the salutation.

My darling Clara, it read:

Clara closed her eyes. What would the letter say? What had Tom committed to paper that he had been unable to express otherwise? She thought of the delight she had felt when Matthew had given her the book that had belonged to Tom. But that was a younger Tom, unknown to her, a man she was meeting before he had become acquainted with her and the reading had been a discovery. This letter was addressed to her.

My darling Clara,

You have been so bright and so brave throughout my illness that I do not have the courage to tell you what I sense to be true. This illness is mortal and I shall not survive it. I would not for the world bring you more sadness when I know how much you want me to get well. If it were in my power to do so, I would do it. But this wasting that has claimed so much of my strength has entered a new and virulent stage and I can feel it within me, taking life from me, bit by bit.

What I have to tell you is not easy. I will always love you and I know that you will always love me. But you, God willing, are destined for a long life, and I would not have you enduring those years as if you were in the grave. I want you to greet the future that awaits you and know that you have my blessing for happiness to come. You have been a wife more precious than jewels and as you sit at my bedside, your presence is a constant source of comfort. I do not know where your strength comes from; I feel that you are giving it all to me. When I am gone, I pray that you will not lose yourself in grief. Our love for one another will not leave even after I am gone. It will forever be a part of who you are.

I beg that you will do this for me, beloved. Live. Your life must of necessity take you to another love and my prayer for you is that God leads a man of good heart and soul to your side. I pray that your life will be full and that you will go on to experience the joys of life that have been denied to us. But know that, although our time together was brief, it has been full. Few men are as fortunate as I have been to be married to a woman who bestows her love with every smile. Remember my request and honor it, darling Clara: Live.

Clara folded the letter neatly and put it back into the trunk . She did not realize that she had been crying until she saw that the top of the desk was wet. She touched her cheeks; they were wet.

Tom, in his letter, had expressed what her grandmother, in less delicate phrasing, had said. Live.

She looked out the window. Robins, confident of spring, were chirping in the trees which would soon be glorious with blossoms. On wings, they soared into the sky as if they were unfettered. The seeds that would be planted in the garden would soon begin to display signs of life. The earth would turn from its austere gray, barren hues to the lovely nuances of spring. And then summer would follow. And autumn. And then winter would come again, the

time of the year when death seemed to lodge into the landscape.
And then spring.

Live, Tom said.

Live.

Heeding Tom's Wish

"Mr. Field is here to call, ma'am."

"Thank you, Hodge. You may show him in."

Nervously, Clara bit her lip. She had not known if he would respond to the letter that she had sent to him, inviting him to call when he was in Lennington again. She had told no one that she had written to him, not even her grandmother. After posting the letter, she had spent many a sleepless night. Was she too bold to ask a bachelor to call upon her? Was she over-hasty, reaching out to the man she had sent away so callously. Was she wrong to recognize that Tom's words had unshackled her because she had begun to feel a closeness to Matthew and she thought herself, until Tom's absolution in the letter, wrong to do so.

"Clara," Matthew rushed into the room, his speed proof that he had wasted no time, upon receiving the letter, to come to Lennington. "I hardly dared hope, but when I received your letter, I thought it surely means that you have forgiven me for our conversation in the garden in March. I did not mean to—"

"Please," she said, interrupting him. "There is no need for forgiveness, except that I must beg for yours. I was selfish when last we met."

"You could never be selfish," he argued. "You are the soul of graciousness."

"No, Grandmother has warned me that mourning can be very selfish and I am guilty of that excess. You see, as we met and talked throughout the winter, I could feel some of my grief easing. At first—please Matthew, you must sit down. I feel as if you fear that you will have to bolt."

"You must sit down first," he said as a grin began to spread across his face.

Clara laughed; she had forgotten that she had stood to greet him and had remained standing. "Very well, I shall sit and you must do the same."

"Gladly. Now that we have satisfied the gods of etiquette," he said, leaning forward in his chair as if he were so eager for her words that he could not sit back in comfort, but must be ready to move, "please proceed."

Clara smiled at him. "You have made me lose my train of thought."

"I could feel some of my grief easing. At first—please Matthew, you must sit down," he repeated. "You forget," he said at her astonished glance, "I am a lawyer. Remembering what others say is part of how I earn my living."

"I shall not forget it a second time," she said. "Perhaps you already know what I am going to say."

"Perhaps I know what I hope you will say," he replied. "But I should like to hear it anyway."

"I took such pleasure in your visits. It was—that is, it did help my grief to speak of Tom with someone who had known him, as you did. But as the visits continued, I could not admit to myself that I was beginning to look forward to the visits because I wanted to see you. I felt ashamed of myself for thinking of any man but Tom. When we walked that day in the garden and you spoke of your feelings, it was as if you were holding a mirror to what I was feeling. I did not have the courage to acknowledge that I returned those feelings, and I sent you away."

"What has happened to make you change your mind about how you feel?" he asked intently, leaning so far forward, his hands clasped in front of his knees, that she thought he might topple from the chair.

"Tom," she replied. "Throughout my mourning for him, he has been present. You brought me that book that belonged to him and it gave me such pleasure. Then, when I was going through his belongings this spring, I found a letter that he had written but had never given it to me. In the letter, he wrote that he knew he was dying, but that he could not admit this to me because he knew that I wanted him to live. He wrote that it was his wish and his prayer that when he was

gone, I would mourn for a time but then I would live again. He wrote so eloquently and so sincerely that I knew he meant what he said. That was when I wrote to you, asking you to call.”

“Thank you,” he said. Leaning forward still further, he took her hands in his. “I feared, after I left, that I had frightened you with my declaration. I know I cannot replace Tom; it is not my intention nor my wish to do so. You must believe me. Tom was a dear friend and he will always be a part of your life. I would like to be a part of your life as well. The next part of your life, if you will let me.”

“Matthew, Hodges told me—“ Mrs. Sullivan, who had just entered the room, saw Matthew’s hands enfolding Clara’s. She realized that she was interrupting a private moment. “that you had called. I will have tea sent up for you.”

“It’s quite all right, Mrs. Sullivan,” Matthew said, standing up without relinquishing his hold on Clara’s hands. “In fact, I hope that you will not leave. You see . . . I am about to propose to your granddaughter and before I do so, I suppose I ought to seek your permission.”

“Is that so, Clara?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

Clara blushed. “Matthew and I have been discussing . . . “

“About time, I should say,” Mrs. Sullivan replied. “Matthew, you don’t need an old woman to help you propose marriage to a young one. I shall see about tea and I believe that a tray will arrive in thirty minutes or so, which gives you half an hour to declare your intentions.” She paused by the door. “Oh, by the way . . . you have my permission. Clara is of a mind to do what she pleases, but let us observe the illusion that she is a docile granddaughter who will do as I bid.”

Mrs. Sullivan was smiling as she closed the door.

“It’s good to know that I have your grandmother’s blessing.”

“You’ve had it for some time,” Clara commented wryly.

“Our grandmothers both approve. Mine is of the same mind.”

“You told her?”

"I didn't have to. When I showed up, post-haste, and said I was coming to call on you, she was pleased. Poor Gran; she's having a devil of a time with Elizabeth."

"Why?"

"Shall we walk in the garden? I should very much like to rectify the setting for my past rejection."

"I didn't reject you," Clare protested as she tied the ribbon of her bonnet and put on a light shawl.

Matthew offered his arm. Hesitantly, she accepted it. Matthew noticed the pause,, but did not comment on it, realizing that it would take Clara some time before she was entirely at her ease with courtship a second time.

The garden was vividly alive with varying shades of green from the rows of plants busily engaged in the process of producing leaves and stems. Spring flowers had faded but summer blooms were taking their place. Sitting on the bench under the shade of a spreading tree had become one of Clara's favorite past times as the weather improved. She could watch the birds as they flew about, their wings liberating them from the bounds of earth.

"You certainly did," Matthew corrected her.

She sat down on the bench. Matthew sat beside her.

"I think I should rather discuss the devil of a time you're having with Elizabeth," she told him, "than to discuss our last meeting in the garden."

He smiled. His smile reminded her of Tom's smile, which was odd, because Tom's blond looks were entirely different from Matthew's brown coloring. Still, they both smiled as men without secrets, entirely open to the world, with nothing to hide. Two men who had the consciences of men of honor and whose appearance confirmed their conduct.

"As you know, Bessie—I have been instructed not to call her Bessie, by the way—"

"And so you do so all the more," Clara guessed.

"She's my younger sister, it's my duty to plague her. Bessie has been enamored of the Jeromes and wanted Anthony Jerome as a suitor. But when Jerome discovered that Bessie's inheritance is quite tied up in a legal knot, he lost interest. Instead of blaming Jerome for being a fortune hunter, Bessie blames me for being a tyrant. Gran has indulged her since our parents died and it has not improved my sister's character. She may be a challenging sister-in-law to you, but there is no malice in her."

"Mr. Field," Clara said, "you have not precisely proposed marriage and yet throughout our conversation you reference matrimony."

"I am a lawyer," he reminded her. "We can't come at a subject by a straight path. Besides, I rather assumed that, with your letter, you were proposing to me. I accept, by the way."

"I proposed to you! I have never heard of such a thing!"

"It's a changing world, Clara," he grinned. "Women are doing the most outlandish things. Writing novels, painting; some are even calling for the right to vote. In such a world, why should a woman not propose marriage to the man of her choice?"

"You sound so much like Tom," Clara said as she sputtered with laughter. "He said such nonsensical things at times. Does it bother you when I mention Tom?"

Matthew took her hands in his and held them closely. "Clara, Tom was my friend. I think that he would approve of us marrying. He would not want you to be alone."

He leaned closer and she knew that he was going to kiss her. For a brief instant, she withdrew. Matthew's smile disappeared.

"Clara, I cannot compete with Tom," he said. "I would not even attempt to do so. I am alive, and you are alive, and if we are to be wed, Tom will always be in our memories but he cannot join us."

His words were similar to what Tom had written in his letter. She knew what she had to do. As Matthew said, it was a changing world. She leaned closer to Matthew and, blushing madly, pressed her lips against his in a kiss that started out from her initiation but was soon followed by his eager response, laughter bubbling up from his throat as they kissed. His mouth was firm against hers, but she

could feel his lips curving in the smile that was familiar to her as they kissed.

“Clara,” he said, breaking away from the kiss, “I accept your proposal of marriage.”

He hugged her and she allowed herself to be caught up in his embrace. It was good to be held in a man’s arms once more, she thought as they kissed again, his lips searching and gentle, but purposeful, seeking to know her through this intimacy. It would take time for her to adjust to the thought of marriage, but the time had come. Winter had ended and summer was upon them. The birds had taken wing and were free of the constraints of the earth.

Live, Tom had written.

And she would do so.

:)

* * *

The Riches of the Impoverished Duke

A Historical Regency Romance Book

The Grieving Heart

Lord Alistair Thurmond paused at the top of the stairs. The manor was quiet, unusually quiet and as he put his first foot on the top stair, something hanging at the bottom of the top pillar of the balustrade caught his eye. The lone candle gave off very little light but there was nothing he could do about the shadowy staircase. His stepmother, Lady Emily was very frugal when it came to household supplies and she kept telling everyone that there wasn't enough money for anything. Hence the few scattered candles along the hallway and landing.

Like many other days, he'd been unable to sleep because of his fears about the uncertain future his duchy faced. To all intents and purposes, he should already have been The Duke of Great Yarmouth after his father, but something seemed to be delaying the whole process. The Regent should have summoned him to London for his father's title to be conferred on him, but all was still silent a month and a week after his father's death and burial.

During his father's illness, he'd stepped in to see that the estate didn't fall apart and upon his sudden death, had assumed that he would be the next duke. But it was looking as though the title wasn't going to be his for quite a while, if ever. He was aware that many of his peers who'd come into their titles had done so just a week or two at most after the deaths of their predecessors. What was going on, or did his father have another son that he didn't know about? Had his father changed his mind about him being the next duke? Alistair had so many questions to which he had no answers. More than ever, he wished his father was still alive. Had his half- brother Enoch lived, he might have taken the title of duke because their father had loved him so much even though he was not his son by marriage.

When Lord Nelson met Joanne Weller, she was just coming out of mourning for her husband who'd been an admiral in the British Navy.

He'd just turned thirty and held the title of Baron. Joanne's husband's ship had sunk off the Coast of Gibraltar after a terrible storm and there'd been no survivors. They were returning from Egypt where they had been for six months, watching over England's interests. Admiral Kevin Weller had left his wife with a five year old son and it was the boy who first caught Lord Nelson's eyes.

He'd just been coming out of the London Museum when he became aware of a small boy following him. He stopped and turned and the boy looked at him with solemn eyes. He was too smartly dressed to be one of the street urchins that followed gentlemen and ladies all over the streets of London begging for a penny. Or maybe he was lost and needed help finding his parents or guardian.

"Good morning, son, I notice that you seem to be following me. Is everything alright? Do you need my help in any way?"

"Good morning, sir," the boy had said. "My name is Enoch Weller and I wanted you to know that you left your walking cane inside the museum."

Nelson, who was not yet the duke as his father was still alive, laughed out loud. "Why, I believe that I did. It's an ivory cane that I got for my father for his birthday. Not being used to it, I forgot it at the desk. Thank you for reminding me, young man." He reached into his pocket for a guinea. "This is for your troubles." But Enoch wouldn't take it.

"Mama says when you do a good turn, you shouldn't expect any payment in return."

"Your mother sounds like a very wise woman."

"She is," there was pride in the child's voice and before Nelson could say a further word, a pretty lady about his age emerged from the museum.

"Enoch, what did I tell you about leaving the museum without letting me know where you're going?"

"Mama, I followed this gentleman because he'd left his ivory cane inside the museum. He says it's a present for his father's birthday." The boy's face fell. "Sir, my father died a year ago. I wish he was here so I could buy him an ivory cane like yours."

"Enoch, don't trouble the gentleman," she turned to him. "I'm sorry,

sir."

"That's alright. This young man saved me quite a tidy sum." When Nelson had looked into the widow's eyes, his world was never the same again. They were married a month later and he brought them to this estate.

Alistair had never tired of hearing his grandmother's stories about the deep love that his parents had shared. She had loved Enoch as if he were her blood grandson and two years later when Alistair was born, her world was complete. But that was until that fateful morning when Joanne was found dead in her bed. She hadn't complained of any ailment and the coroner said that her heart might have stopped by itself. Alistair was only two years old and his grandmother had taken on the role of his mother from then on. Lord Nelson mourned his wife for a long time but he eventually had to move on with his life and two years later, had married Emily Bolt, his son's governess. According to Alistair's grandmother, that had been the biggest mistake that her son had done.

Going down on his haunches, Alistair's left hand reached for the piece of string that hung there. It was an odd place for it to be and he plucked it off the pillar, then chuckled softly at his paranoia. The shadows were causing him to see danger lurking around every corner and he got to his feet once again, the string in his hand. It was too small to pose any danger to anyone but he just felt that he should get it out of sight.

Of course, Christmas had just ended and this was probably a piece from one of the strings that had held the decorative garlands. One of the servants must have simply plucked the longer part out in haste and left this piece. Alistair found that he was missing the pretty flowers that had adorned the hallway, bringing some cheer to the sombre mood of the manor. Every year since he was small child, his grandmother had made Christmas beautiful for him. With the help of the servants, she would place flowers and ribbons all over the manor and hundreds of candles would light the hallways and rooms until well after the New Year.

This year, however, she hadn't been there to do it and his stepmother tried her best. Even though the household was in mourning after the double tragedy that had befallen them, Lady

Emily had tried to cheer everyone up by decorating the whole manor. It wasn't the same without his grandmother and father, but in the midst of his pain, Alistair knew that the duchy would survive.

He put his left leg on the top stair, his hand still holding the balustrade and stopped. The pain in his heart threatened to overwhelm him and he doubled up, shutting his eyes tight so the tears wouldn't spill over. He missed his grandmother and father, whose deaths had been just a month apart from each other.

First, it was Grandma Monica, or Lady Monnie as everyone had fondly called her over the years. She was the dowager duchess and was well loved by the tenants and family, evidenced by the large number of mourners who'd turned up on the day she was buried. It was a private ceremony for the family only, but that didn't stop the tenants and other villagers from standing at a respectful distance to show their love for the woman who'd been the matriarch of the estate for over forty years.

For as long as he could remember, Grandma Monnie had taken on the role of his mother, even after his father married Lady Emily. She was there when he laughed and when he cried, holding him and telling him that all would be well. She'd never been sick a day in her life for as long as he could remember. Waking up to find her broken body lying at the bottom of the staircase two months ago, had nearly stopped his heart. The coroner, who was called in very early to determine the cause of her death ruled it as an accident. He'd said Grandma Monnie must have tripped when her sandal got caught in her long dressing gown. She was growing old and her sight had probably been failing, so the coroner said, which was probably why she hadn't been steady on her feet.

Alistair didn't want to believe that that was what had happened but he had to accept the explanation. Grandma's eye sight had been perfect till the day she died, and he should know. She'd read to him every day even when he became an adult, because that was the only time they had to spend together given the fact that he was getting more and more involved in matters of the duchy. Yet those moments spent with his grandmother had been very valuable to him and he missed her.

Just when he was beginning to get used to life without his

grandmother, his father fell ill. At first, he thought it was because of the shock of losing his grandmother but as the days went by and he got worse, Alistair began to fear the worst. That his father had given up his will to live. Just four weeks later, he had succumbed to his illness and once again, the household was thrown into deep grief. Lord Nelson Thurmond, like his mother, had been well loved. He was fair and kind to his tenants and when things were really bad because of adverse weather, the manor provided for its fifty tenants.

"Oh, grandma," he murmured as he made his way to his father's study, now his because Ronald, his half-brother, wanted nothing to do with anything that would remind him of their father.

Spring would soon be here, and his grandmother always said it was the time for new beginnings. "*When winter comes, the snow buries all the ugly and dead things and then comes spring, when the earth returns to life once again,*" she'd once told him when he asked her why she loved spring.

Alistair prayed that this spring would bring good tidings with it and some cheer to all. The hour was late and he should be in bed, but he needed to find a book that would make him sleepy. He opened the study door and hadn't taken more than two steps across the room when he came to an abrupt halt. The lantern that his grandfather had brought back after visiting India years ago, was still lit. Placed on the mantle, it illuminated the whole room, allowing him to see everything. Alistair always made sure that it burned through the night in honour of his grandfather. The lantern had been used so many times in the past when the old duke would leave the warmth of his manor to go to the pier to check on his fishing boats and the fishermen. It had given light in the darkness and seeing it burning always comforted Alistair.

A big, gentle smile broke out on his face. A little girl lay sprawled on her stomach in front of the fire, her head supported by palms which rested on two small elbows. Bless Old George, he thought, for lighting the fire in the usually cold study. George Smith was the family butler and had been with them even before Alistair was born. After the duke's death, Lady Emily got rid of all the servants save for George and his wife, Leah. Leah was the cook and also looked after his niece.

“Princess Nancy, why aren’t you in bed?” He crouched next to his four year old niece, whose face showed its delight on seeing her favourite and only uncle.

“Uncle Duke,” she scrambled to her feet and hurled herself into his arms. From when Nancy had started talking, his grandmother had told her that he was the next duke and that’s how the name came about. He had to put one hand on the floor to support himself or they would have both sprawled backwards. “I waited and waited and waited but Leah didn’t come for me like papa said.”

Alistair frowned, rising to his feet with the little girl still in his arms. “When was your papa here?”

“He came when I was just finishing my dinner and brought me here to wait for Leah.” She snuggled into his shoulder. “Uncle Duke, I love you,” she murmured sleepily. “Can I stay here with you?”

“And I love you too, my little imp, but it’s long past your bedtime,” he responded softly, making his way to the nursery on the first floor. It was a cold and lonely room and he felt guilty for not paying more attention to his niece’s needs. Ever since Lady Emily, her grandmother had fired her last two governesses within days of each other, it had fallen to Leah to add child minding to her culinary duties. And clearly, she wasn’t doing such a good job if the child was still up at this hour. But he didn’t blame her at all; working in the manor kitchen was exhausting and Nancy could also be quite a handful. The past few days had seen an influx of visitors who continued to pay their respects and condole with the family during their mourning period. Leah had to prepare endless cups of tea and dainty cakes to serve the visitors, and she had no help at all.

“Here we are, Princess,” he laid her gently on her bed, glad that someone, probably Leah, had lit some candles. But they would soon be gone and he had to get her some more because she hated sleeping in the dark. “You really need someone to take care of you, my love,” he tucked her in, kissed her forehead and walked to her closet for more candles. There were none and he went to his bedroom to get some.

There was only one left and he took it but knew that it wouldn’t last too long. His stepmother bought the cheap tally candles that lasted

a few minutes at most. He was going to have to stay in the nursery just in case Nancy woke up in the night and got frightened. They really needed a governess for her.

* * *

It was raining when Alistair finally woke up. Nancy was standing over him and he smiled at her. "Why are you out of your bed, it's very cold outside?" His neck felt stiff for lying in an uncomfortable position nearly the whole night. He hadn't gone back to his bedroom.

"I'm hungry, Uncle Duke," she climbed onto his lap and snuggled closer. "Can I get a glass of milk?"

"Of course, you can," he put her back on the bed and reached for her woollen coat, then he bent down to look for her shoes. "Let's go and ask Leah for some milk and breakfast," he said after ensuring that she was well adorned to ward off the cold. He also needed to speak to the cook to keep the child with her in the kitchen at all times so she wouldn't feel so lonely.

Leaving his niece with the cook, Alistair went to the study to see if more mail had come for the manor. As usual, there was nothing but bills, bills and more bills and as he leaned back in the large chair behind the oak desk, he closed his eyes in despair. What would his father do in such a situation? It seemed as if they owed money to everyone in Great Yarmouth!

Though they hadn't been wealthy in recent years, they had lived a comfortable life. The Thurmond Duchy had once been the wealthiest in the east of England. His grandfather, Lord Grant Thurmond had owned six large fishing boats and supplied nearly half of all the fish consumed by London. When the Napoleonic Wars started, the navy hired his boats to use during the war and had also commissioned him to supply flintlocks, spearheads, knives and axes. He made really good money and the duchy was doing very well.

But then disaster struck when Napoleon's navy destroyed five of those boats and all the men in them. After the war, Lord Morgan fell seriously ill and no matter how many doctors were called in, he

didn't get better. Early one morning, he just slipped away and nearly all his wealth with him. All the family had left was one fishing boat which couldn't quite sustain them. That left only the tenants as the source of income for the estate.

Because of Grandma Monnie's management, things had been going well for a while. But not anymore! After her death and when his father fell ill, his stepmother took over the running of the estate. He should have insisted on doing it but he was mourning his grandmother. He'd checked the books in recent days and was dismayed at what he saw. Most of the tenants were heavily in debt and owed the estate so much. He didn't understand what had happened because his grandmother had been a very good bookkeeper. Sometimes he felt like asking all the tenants to leave so he could give their places to others but then he would always think about their families and how long they'd been on the estate.

"Oh Grandma, Papa, what would you do right now?" He felt really tired and quite anxious. The last thing he wanted was to take on a duchy that had fallen apart. Everyone would look at him as the one who brought down the great Thurmond House.

A door slammed shut somewhere in the house and he knew that his stepmother was finally up. The one thing that made him always retreat to the study was because this was one room she never set foot in. For the twenty years that she'd been married to his father, he'd never once seen her enter the study. He'd never really thought about it until now.

Well, he wouldn't have to deal with her immediately and from the sound of stomping down the stairs, she was angry. Lady Emily was always angry, even when she'd been his governess. That seemed like donkey years ago but from the day she'd walked into this house as his governess, things had never been the same again.

Surprised Heiress

Leticia Holmes was awakened by the sound of voices below her bedroom window. From the dim light seeping through the curtain and into her bedroom, she could tell that it was nearly dawn. She could make out Larry Aitkin and Gary Boyd's voices. They were the two stable lads and she couldn't quite understand what they were saying because they spoke with thick Scottish brogues.

Tuning their voices out, she rolled onto her stomach and stretched her hands, wincing when they connected with the headboard. This was the same bed she'd used as a child, perhaps it was finally time for her to get a new larger one, but she loved it so much. She hadn't grown that tall but knocking her hands against the headboard each day reminded her that she wasn't a small girl anymore. Besides, it seemed to be getting narrower with each passing month.

She felt yesterday's excitement welling up within her breast. This was her first real day as an heiress. It sounded quite intimidating but deep down, she was still the same person, only thousands of pounds wealthier than she'd been just a few days ago. She could now afford a new bigger bed and that was one of the first things she was going to ask her mother for.

While she felt happy that her family would no longer have to live from hand to mouth, she was a little bit sad because it had happened when her maternal grandmother died. Grandmother Amy Grainer had been almost a stranger until a year ago when she came to live with them.

This was all because Leticia's mother had married well beneath her family's expectations. Lucinda Grainer had fallen in love with their lowly estate manager and run away with him to Gretna Green where they got married. Fenton Holmes had won the young girl's heart and nothing anyone did or said could change her mind. Her family cut her off and she never saw her father till the day he died

and even then, the family wouldn't let her go to his burial.

But a few years later, Granny Amy had reached out to her only daughter, wanting to bridge the large gap between them. Leticia's mother had at first refused, still bitter about the years her family had rejected her but her husband managed to convince her to forgive. Amy was seriously sick and wanted to make up with her only child, so she came to live with them. In the years that she hadn't known her grandmother, Leticia had thought of her as a cold and hard woman but when she met her, it seemed like they'd never been apart. They'd spent so much time together in the one year she lived with them and Leticia never knew just how wealthy her grandmother was until her will was read yesterday afternoon.

She was still in shock at having been named Nana's sole heiress. The voices faded away and Leticia turned on her side, knowing that Susan would soon be in to get her out of bed. Spring was here and she loved picking flowers for the table in her mother's drawing room, but today she just wanted to lie in bed and think about the vast changes that were about to take place in her life. She was an heiress, and the thought brought a broad smile to her face even as she quashed the fears that the thought brought.

There was a soft knock and then the door opened. "Miss Leticia, you need to get up right now. Your mama is asking for you."

"Oh Susan, why can't I just stay here for the rest of my life?" She closed her eyes against the early morning sunshine which poured into her bedroom when her abigail drew back the drapes. "I feel so free and happy that I don't want to get out of bed."

Susan snorted softly, picking up the clothes that were strewn all over the room. Leticia was a lovely young woman but getting her to clean up after herself was going to be a lifelong task. Not that Susan was complaining for she'd never been happier than working for the Holmes family as their only daughter's handmaid. Leticia treated her more like a sister than a maid and she loved it here. The family wasn't wealthy but they were kind to her and the other servants.

"Your mama said she didn't want you to keep her waiting because she has to go out a little bit later. Now, I brought you some water to wash up, why don't I help you with your morning ablutions,

ma'am?"

* * *

Her mother was in the drawing room and as soon as she noticed Leticia standing in the doorway, gracefully rose to her feet. She was a beautiful woman, tall and slender, unlike Leticia who took after her father who was more on the stockier side.

"There's my beautiful child," Lucinda took Leticia's hand and led her to the long couch. "Sit here, we have so much to talk about."

"What about, Mama? I haven't had breakfast and my stomach is about to begin growling like a hungry bear."

"Susan will bring your breakfast to you right here."

"But Mama..."

"Child, stop arguing so early in the morning, it will give me a headache." In reality, Leticia wondered why her mother had asked her down so early. Usually, Lucinda spent the better part of the morning in her chambers and only emerged when her husband returned from the family run inn, in the village square. He was gone most mornings and would be back by noon to have lunch with his family and then spend the rest of the afternoon catching up on village news.

Bromley was a middleclass and quiet rural village and an important coaching stop on the way to Hastings from London. The Pretty Lady Inn had been in Leticia's family for years having been started by her great grandparents. Her father had only come to work there after he married his beloved Lucinda Grainer. He was actually the one who'd changed the name in honour of her mother, from The Bromley Inn to The Pretty Lady.

"You seem to have drifted off to somewhere," Lucinda's voice brought her daughter back to the present. "It's becoming quite a tiresome habit which I don't approve of."

"I'm sorry, Mama," she said, her face brightening when Susan walked in with a well laden tray. "Oh, my breakfast is here."

"Can't you pause from your eating for a moment and listen to what I have to say?" Lucinda's voice was impatient and Leticia frowned. "Food isn't getting away, just listen to me for a moment. Eating too much will just cause your waistline to expand more than it is now."

Leticia's face fell and she pretended to pay attention to her mother, whose words hurt. She knew that she wasn't beautiful, not by a long shot. Her eyes were too far apart, her mouth too thin and her nose too large. Her hair was brown and mousy and her dark eyes were clearly inherited from her father. What's more, she wasn't slender and dainty and she always felt that her mother was disappointed in the way she looked. But her father loved her and that was all that mattered. She could never measure up in her mother's eyes and never tried, but once in a while, she longed for some approval from her.

"Just eat your breakfast while I talk," Lucinda waved Susan away, but Leticia had lost her appetite. Of course, it would come back later but right now, food was the last thing she wanted. She didn't want to give her mother any more reason to tell her that she was growing fat.

"It's alright, I'll take it later. What did you want to see me about?"

"Well," Lucinda looked excited, "After the news got out that you're now an heiress, a few families from around here heard about it and now you've been invited to some balls. This morning, the tray was full of calling and invitation cards and I don't know which ones to accept and which ones to reject."

"Really!"

"Yes, this is the chance we've been praying for so you can finally find a good husband."

"Yes, a husband who only wants me just because I've come into some money," she commented, her tone dry.

"Don't think of it like that. It's just normal for a young lady to have a good dowry. You didn't have one before and we were worried that you would never get married, at least not to a respectable man. But now, things are really looking good for you."

"In what way, mother?"

"You'll be able to meet a man from a good family, if he's titled that will even be better," Lucinda clasped her hands, clearly the fact that her daughter was now an heiress had gone to her head. "Think of all the gowns, hats and shoes that you'll be able to afford now. When I return from visiting Lady Palmer, I'll immediately send for the best seamstress in London and get you some lovely frocks. You'll be so happy, child. Your life is about to change in ways even I, as your mother, could never have dreamed possible."

"Isn't that something like double standards, mother?"

"What do you mean?"

"Twenty three years ago, you gave up everything because you fell in love with Papa. You were disowned by your family and they wouldn't have anything to do with you. Papa's family was poor and couldn't measure up to your own family but you've had a wonderful marriage. Why would you want me to marry a man who might not love me for myself but for what I have? Don't you want me to also find true love, mother?"

"That was then and this is now, child. Men are like little puppies in case you didn't know. You train them and make them do whatever you want. Once you marry him, you just need to learn how to slowly and subtly do things that make him think he's the one in control but yet you are. You can make a man fall in love with you, Leticia, if you know how to use your feminine wiles."

Leticia gave her mother an odd look, "Is that what you've done with Papa for the past twenty three years?" She asked in a quiet voice. "Made him fall in love with you because you used your feminine wiles on him?"

Lucinda had the grace to blush. "That's different ..."

Leticia shook her head, "It's not, mother no matter what you tell yourself. Love is unselfish and it's beautiful, and that's what Grandma told me. She said I should wait for the one man who will truly love me in my best and worst moments. A man who will see beyond the wealth that I've suddenly come into and see the real woman beneath all this. She told me that she always respected you for standing up to her and grandpa and marrying the man you loved with your whole heart." She stood up. "I'm not beautiful and I

know it, mother. The last thing I want is for someone to marry me for my money and then use it to chase after mistresses who are prettier or have slender shapes. Right now, any man who comes courting me is only after my money and that's something I won't take. Where were they before they knew that I had money?" A note of bitterness crept into her voice. "I'd like to be the most important person in a man's life, someone he loves, cherishes and respects. None of those gold diggers will be that and I'm not prepared to waste my life and time on any of them. My inheritance is supposed to bring me joy, not regrets and pain later on in life."

"Such foolishness, child. Why don't you just wake up and admit that you'll never find love? A good marriage is all you can hope for right now and it's been made possible by your having a good dowry. You're twenty three and in another two years, won't be attractive to anyone. Do you want to live and die all alone, an old spinster with no one to share her life with?"

"Well, if no one falls in love with me, I'll use whatever money I'm allowed to retain to travel and see the world. It's better to live and die an old happy spinster than be with a man who will probably just go through my inheritance while chasing after other women. You rejected three earls and grandma told me that she only came to understand what you did years later. Those men might have been the right husbands according to your family, but they all died within a few years of each other. One died of the Drury Lane Ague, another was shot by the enraged husband of one of his numerous mistress and the last of gout. Of course, they all married young ladies from a wealthy families with healthy dowries but they were never in love. They took numerous mistresses and sired many a byblow but no children with their own wives save for one. Their widows are still miserable to this day. That was the kind of life you escaped and now want me to get into!" She shook her head. "I'd rather die a spinster, mother."

"You can't mean that, Leticia," her mother gaped at her. "Your grandmother shouldn't have filled your head with such things."

"Mama, I mean every word that's coming out of my mouth. I would rather be happy alone than miserable with a man who doesn't love me but just married me for my money. What's worse is that he will use my own money to hurt me. That's not what Grandma had in

mind for me when she left this money to me. She told me all those things so that I would be careful when it came to making a choice of a life partner. If you ask me, she was atoning for the years when she tried to push you into the arms of titled men who would have only brought you pain. Her dying wish was that I would only marry the man who falls in love with me and I with him. That's what I'm going to do to honour her and nothing you say will make me change my mind."

Try as she did, Lucinda Holmes failed to make her daughter see her point of view and she retreated for the moment, to recoup. Leticia knew that the argument was far from over, but she would get her father to see her point of view for he was the one who understood her more than her mother did.

Unsuitable Suitor

"I don't like Spencer Harrington," Leticia announced to her parents not for the first time. "He's pretentious, pompous and arrogant and would make a terrible husband."

"But my child," her father tried to coax her. His wife had sought his help when Lord Spencer Harrington had turned up on their doorstep seeking their daughter's hand in marriage. But Leticia could be stubborn and he didn't want her and her mother to get into a quarrel so he was the one who'd suggested that she consider the baron's suit. "He's a baron and comes from a good family."

The unladylike snort that emerged from Leticia caused her mother to raise her eyebrows in disapproval. "Papa, even if he were the Regent Prince himself, I would never accept his suit because I don't love him and he certainly doesn't even consider me to be suitable for him." She stood up and looked at her parents, "He's been here twice and the man never shakes hands with me like any other decent human being would. I've met marquises, earls and even one duke and they all shook hands with simple old me, Mama. And that was even before I came into my inheritance. So, what makes Spencer think he's so much better than those nobles who are more titled than he is?"

"He has a title and you should respect that," Lucinda put in and was rewarded with a wary look by her daughter. "At least give honour where it's due."

"Mama, whatever you say, that man is not a good person and would make a terrible husband. Even if he was the last man on earth, I wouldn't accept his suit."

"You've only met him twice, how can you make such judgments about him? Aren't you allowing your prejudices to show?"

Leticia knew that arguing with her mother would only prolong the

matter. "Mama," she spoke very patiently even though all she wanted to do was to shout and tell her parents to leave her alone. "You've heard how he talks to us, as if we should be prostrating ourselves at his feet. He turns his nose up when he's in our presence and it's like we're quite beneath him. Why didn't he ever come calling before this money that grandma left me came into the picture? Do you expect me to curtsy to my husband every single day of our lives?"

"No one said you would have to do that."

"Well, the Spencer that I know will insist on that and Mama, even you know how such formalities irritate me. I won't be talked into considering Spencer Harrington as a husband so please don't ask me again."

"But ..."

Fenton reached out a hand and placed it gently on his wife's arm. He knew that when Leticia decided on something, she could be very stubborn about it. "Leticia, why don't you go on to your room so your mother and I can talk?"

"Yes, Papa." And without a backward glance, she left the room, shutting the door behind her. But she didn't move away immediately because she wanted to hear what her father had to say.

"My love," he was saying, "You should realize by now that pushing Leticia only makes her more stubborn."

"I can't understand why she won't give Lord Spencer a chance. In the past three weeks since she came into her inheritance, we've been to balls nearly every night but she won't dance with any young man more than once. Many times, she even sits out dances and claims her feet are hurting because of her new shoes. We've gone to different homes for high teas, luncheons and even dinners but the child behaves like she doesn't want to be there at all. I'm afraid that society will turn its back on our child and she won't be able to find a husband. Young men have been coming to the house but she's very polite and soon sends them on their way. I don't understand this child."

"My love, you've got to know that Leticia has a bit of you and me in

her. The stubbornness that made you turn away from Lord Piers Clink, Lord Charles Worth and Lord Bardwell Summer and all of the earls, is the same trait that runs through our daughter's veins. You can't force her to do anything she doesn't want to do but the best thing is to try and win her to our side. Let her see the good attributes of the man and that will make her interested in him. You know by now that titles don't mean a thing to our daughter so trying to convince her to marry Lord Spencer for his is just a waste of time."

"Very well then, I'll try to remember what you've said, but I wish she would just listen to us for once."

"Don't worry, my darling. With Leticia, pulling back will draw her forward."

"What do you mean?"

"We won't push the baron at her but will keep inviting him to come around so she can get used to seeing him. In that way, she'll begin to open her heart and then when he finally proposes, she'll only be too happy to say yes."

* * *

Leticia flung herself across her bed and closed her eyes wearily. She was really tired of arguing with her parents all the time about Spencer but there was something about him that made her a little afraid. He wasn't the kind of man she wanted to get to know, let alone be married to.

The door opened and Susan came in with her freshly washed and pressed garments. "Why do you look so downcast, my lady?"

"Susan, I've asked you plenty of times not to refer to me as such. I'm just simple Leticia Holmes, nothing more."

Susan giggled. "Word is out that you'll soon be married to a baron so I'm just preparing my tongue to roll out the title. My lady or should I say, baroness?"

Leticia's response was to snatch up one of the soft pillows and hurl

it at her abigail. Susan neatly sidestepped so it fell harmlessly to the floor. Laughing loudly she bent down and picked it up, returning it to the bed.

“Honestly, when cook said your mama is all riled up about you rejecting the suit of that man, I was really happy,” she came and sat down on the bed. In other households, she would have received a thorough tongue lashing for daring to sit on her mistress’s bed but Leticia was different. “I don’t like that man one bit, Miss Leticia and have been praying that his silly title wouldn’t sway your decision to marry him.”

Leticia sat up and folded her legs beneath her, clutching her pillow to her chest for comfort. “What do you know about him?”

“Larry says the man imbibes too much on whiskey and he also loves women. Gary called him a philanderer of the worst kind and he also gambles on everything. He probably suffers from the clap from his numerous misdemeanours and what kind of life is that you’ll be leading, my dear mistress? His father left him some money and land which he gambled away and is now searching for a wealthy wife to support his excesses. I don’t know how much inheritance your grandmother left you, but that man would soon go through it and leave you destitute.”

“How do Larry and Gary know all this?”

“They’re men and besides, servants talk. Everything that goes on behind closed doors is only kept secret by faithful servants, or else its news for the whole world to hear. I just don’t like that man and it would be really sad if you were to marry him.”

“I’m not, Susan, which is why I need to leave home.”

“Leave home?” Susan glanced at her mistress in astonishment. “Where would you go?”

“Anywhere but here,” she stretched her legs out. “The more I stay here, the more men will come calling and I’m really tired of entertaining them. The false smiling is straining my face and being no beauty, it’s going to make me age even faster.”

“Who said you’re no beauty?”

"The mirror and I've come to terms with it." She touched her face. "My nose is too broad, my lips too small and I have a large forehead."

"You have beautiful dark and mysterious eyes and you have the stature to carry many pregnancies which is what your husband will want. But more than all that, you have the kindest heart in the world and what man wouldn't want a meek, gentle and kind wife?"

"The kind of men that are coming my way are those who are only after my inheritance, Susan," she made an impatient sound. "When Grandma's solicitor read the will and named me sole heiress, I was so excited. Finally, I would have all the gowns, hats and shoes that I've ever wanted without causing my parents so much distress with their humble fare. But after the novelty of owning things faded, all I feel is emptiness inside."

"How can you say that?"

"Susan, wealth isn't everything. People place priorities on the wrong things. Look at my closet," she waved a hand. "I have more gowns than I'll ever need, shoes, hats and purses and yet at any single time, I can only use one of each. By the time I finally get to wearing all of them, moths will have had a fine feast. There's more to life than just being wealthy," she sighed. "When we didn't have money, I envied all the young ladies who seemed to have so many gowns. We were never invited to fancy balls and functions but now, the mail tray downstairs is laden with cards of all kinds. I can't stand the pretentiousness and that's why I have to leave this place."

"But where will you go?" Susan repeated her question, her brow creased with anxiety.

"I know," Leticia sat up straighter, "I can become a governess to some child or children and teach them all that I know. If only I can find a posting far away from here, and once I'm there, if I should meet a man who will fall in love with me and I with him, then I'll bring him back here for Papa's approval. That's the only way that I can really know if a man truly loves me, Susan. By pretending to be a simple governess."

"Will your father approve of your choice when the time comes?"

"My father wants me to be happy. Mama is the one I'll have to win over but once they see how much in love we are, they won't stand in the way," Leticia's eyes went all dreamy. "Susan, do you ever wish you could be married to a good man?"

"That's every young woman's dream, my lady. We're all born with something deep within us that longs to love and be loved but sadly not all of us get that. But still, it's a good thought and I may have a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"My home in Great Yarmouth has many families both nobles and gentry. It's quite possible to find work in one of the manors but we have to be really careful that we don't end up in the home of wicked people."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Before I came to you seven years ago, I worked for one of the families out there. They were earls but the husband and his sons had the roving eye. No female was safe in that household and I fled before they could compromise my virtue. But there are a few other families which are good."

"Would you know of any?"

Susan thought for a while then shook her head. "But it's possible to find out from someone there. There are agencies also that send governesses and servants to different households, we could register with one of those."

"That's a wonderful idea. Now, all I have to do is convince my father that I'll be safe and then we can make plans to leave as soon as possible. I don't trust Spencer Harrington not to get into mischief especially since I've been ignoring him."

"You do need to be very careful, my lady."

"Susan, call me Leticia."

"I'll do that when we're alone but not in company, I'll not call you my lady so that I won't get my ears boxed."

"Very well then. Now, shall we go and find my father?"

Heart Affairs

Alistair saw her the moment she stepped out of the hired chaise that had come up the driveway and had woken him up. There wasn't anything remarkable about the young woman who was looking around her with a lot of interest, but he found himself standing at the window of his bedroom looking down at her through the sheers which hid him from sight. A second lady also got out of the chaise, no doubt her companion and he wondered who they were.

They didn't look like the usual noble ladies who often called at the Thurmond Manor, hoping to catch a glimpse of him but settling for his brother when he wouldn't show up. Their clothes were plain and the valises they carried attested to a simple life of hard work. Then he remembered that they were expecting new servants today. They must be the new governess and chambermaid that his stepmother had decided to hire after all, he thought to himself, and just in time too.

He'd made the suggestion just a few days previously when for the umpteenth time, he found Nancy waiting for him in his study, unable to sleep alone in the cold nursery.

"Lady Emily, the child is unable to sleep in the nursery all alone. She needs someone to take care of her or else she'll get ill. It's not healthy for her to spend so many hours in my study just staring at the fire."

"What would you have me do?" Lady Emily was a big boned woman who, according to Alistair, overdressed to compensate for her lack of daintiness. His grandmother had been tall and slender, but had a regal bearing, unlike his stepmother who came from a simple family and didn't have noble upbringing. She didn't have the graces that came with being a duchess but to her credit, she tried.

While his father was alive and well, Lady Emily had entertained a lot, no doubt trying to fit into the society that looked down on a

governess taking the place of a mistress. It had taken a while for people to warm up to her but there were those who would never open their doors to the new duchess. According to them, she was an imposter and the duke shouldn't have married his son's governess just two years after his wife's untimely death.

At the time, he was only four years old and had to accept that the woman who'd been his governess since he was two was going to be his new mother. When Ronald was born a year later, Alistair had ideas of being a wonderful older brother, just like Enoch had been to him before he drowned.

He'd missed his mother and then a few days later, his older half-brother was reported missing. It was suspected that he had strayed out of the manor and down to the sea where he'd liked going to look at the boats and fishermen coming in with their catch.

In all the years that followed, Alistair tried to be a good older brother and for a time, it had been great having someone to look up to him. But then, Lady Emily began making excuses for the two boys not to play or spend time together. By the time Ron turned nineteen, they were barely on speaking terms and now Alistair acknowledged that it had been partly his fault. He'd given up on his brother and also ignored him.

His stepmother found Ron a wife when he turned nineteen and for a short while, things had been alright at the manor. Grandma Monnie had predicted that the marriage wouldn't last for more than three years and she'd been right, but in a sad way. Charlotte was a sickly young woman with a sizeable dowry and she conceived immediately but the pregnancy took its toll on her. She was dead as soon as she gave birth to her baby girl, and never even had the chance to hold her own child.

Nancy had given them a big scare in her first year of life, being very sickly but lately, she was getting better and needing a governess, and he hoped the visitor who'd caught his eye was it. She looked very young for the post but he didn't want to judge her before meeting her.

Just then, she threw her head back and laughed, not the high pitched shrill sound that many of her peers had. Instead, it was a

warm and deep sound that put a glow on his insides. It had been a long time since he'd heard someone laughing so wholeheartedly and sincerely, and it brought a smile to his face. He needed to hear her voice, so as soon as George let them in, he quickly went down to the drawing room where his stepmother was.

"Your references look alright, so if we can agree on the wages, then the two of you can start work right away," Lady Emily was saying. She was reclining on the chaise longue while the two ladies stood before her. "This is my offer," and she named such a low figure that Alistair expected the ladies to immediately walk out. It was an insulting offer according to him and he was surprised when they accepted it.

The only explanation he could come up with was that the two were very desperate and any kind of job with very low wages would do. Maybe he could step in and have his stepmother add a few pounds to the measly wages.

"What do we have here, Lady Emily?" From when he was a child, his stepmother had forbidden him from calling her mother. She'd insisted on him addressing her by her title and that's the way it had stayed for twenty years. "Who are our guests?"

A slight frown crossed her face before she pasted on her false smile. "These are Leticia Holmes and Susan Crone. Leticia is Nancy's new governess and Susan is the chambermaid. Now, run along to the kitchen and Leah will show you what needs to be done," she dismissed the two ladies as if they were inconsequential.

* * *

Leticia didn't believe that it had been so easy to find a good household to work in. They'd travelled to Great Yarmouth hoping to find an agency that would get them employed. On the coach, a young lady had told them that she was on her way to the Thurmond Estate as governess but didn't want to go. The agency in London had sent her after the duchess made the request, but she'd heard that the woman was difficult to work for.

"One lady at the agency told me to watch out for the duchess who

likes to pick the simplest fights with servants just so she doesn't have to pay their wages." The young woman, who told them her name was Bella Rainer sighed. "I got another posting through my aunt but I don't want the agency to hold this against me just in case I need them later."

"Why don't you let me take the posting at the Thurmond Estate and you can go to your aunt's place? I promise that I won't do anything that will bring dishonour to you, but I really need this job."

The relief in Bella's eyes was evident. "Would you do that? I would be so grateful. You have to find the vicar for that's where I was told to report. Apparently, the duchess doesn't conduct interviews personally. If you impress the vicar then you can be sure that the job is yours."

And just like that, Leticia had found her first posting as a governess. Luckily for the two of them, Lady Emily Thurmond had also been searching for a chambermaid and Susan got employed alongside her. They were interviewed by the vicar who was standing in for the duchess and he'd given them glowing recommendations.

The little girl she was supposed to take care of was delightful and she knew she would enjoy her work. Her only problem was the tall and handsome man who'd come in while Lady Emily was sort of interviewing them. From the moment she set eyes on him, Leticia felt the breath knocked out of her. He wasn't as handsome as Spencer Harrington but there was something about him that would make men and women stop and listen to him.

He also didn't have the arrogant airs of many nobles that she knew and thought he was one of the Lady Emily's sons. Which was quite a surprise given the way the duchess had treated him with disdain. But Leah soon told them who he was.

"That was Lord Alistair Thurmond, the rightful duke," she said in a foreboding voice. "Be careful that you don't do anything to get into his bad books, or Lady Emily's for that matter."

"We're here to work, Mrs. Smith," Leticia could already sense the hostility emitting from the other woman. "I'll be taking care of little Nancy while Susan is the chambermaid. If there's anything you want us to do for you, please let us know."

Leah simply snorted and turned away. Her husband was no more welcoming and Leticia wondered why the two were so hostile. She was wondering about Nancy's parents when Lady Emily called her to meet her charge.

"This is my granddaughter, Emily. Her mother died while giving birth to her and my son, Lord Ronald is her father. He'll be by soon to make sure that you're a suitable governess for his daughter. Otherwise, stick to the nursery and keep the child there with you. I don't like servants who roam around the corridors of the manor, is that clear?"

"Yes, your grace."

Troubled Household

The little girl clasped her arms around Leticia's neck and held on fast.

"Nancy, stop that at once," her grandmother's voice was like a cracked whip. "Sit down and stop making a nuisance of yourself."

Leticia wanted to grab the child and run away from this cold and sombre place that was sucking the life out of her. The manor must have been a wonderful place to live at one time but right now, it was more like a mausoleum. There were no pictures of any ancestors on the walls and the large drapes were old and frayed. The furniture left a lot to be desired and the fittings looked like they hadn't been shined for a long time. This was supposed to be the home of a duke but it looked worse than their own simple house in Bromley.

But Nancy was stubborn and held on. "I want to stay with Miss Ticia," she said.

"Don't make me come over there and pull you away," Lady Emily's voice brooked no nonsense and Leticia was afraid that she might do as she'd said. It was a relief when Lord Alistair came into the drawing room.

"Uncle Duke," Nancy released Leticia's neck and ran to him. He scooped her into his arms and swung her above his head. She giggled when he put her down. "More, more, Uncle Duke."

"If I do any more of that, then you'll be washing me with your breakfast," he took her hand. "Good morning," he addressed both women but his eyes were mostly on Leticia. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"Not much anyway," Lady Emily waved her hand dismissively. "I just wanted to find out how my granddaughter was doing with her new governess. It's been what, two weeks and this child still clings

to you like you're her lifeline."

Leticia knew better than to answer her mistress so she kept her head down.

"Lady Emily, isn't it a good thing that Nancy has taken to her governess? She sleeps better and I haven't found her in the study at ungodly hours."

"Whatever you say, now run along," and Leticia held her hand out to Nancy, who took it and they both went out of the room. "I really don't like that woman," Lady Emily said once the door was shut.

Alistair wasn't really surprised. His stepmother liked to control people like puppets and anyone who seemed to have a mind of their own immediately became an enemy. "Why, Lady Emily, what has Miss Holmes done?"

"She's teaching Nancy how to be pig-headed. The child no longer listens to me or does what I instruct her. It's always Ticia this, or Ticia that," she made a sound of disgust. "When I employed her as a governess, I expected that she would teach the child to be obedient and follow all instructions."

Alistair wanted to laugh but knew that it would annoy his stepmother. She really was the limit. "I'm sorry that you're not happy with the new governess," he said instead. "Is there anything I can do?"

The front door slammed shut and heavy footsteps sounded in the hallway and his half-brother stuck his head in the drawing room. "What are you doing?"

"Not much, where have you been?" Lady Emily rose to her feet. "Did you spend another night outside this house? You know how I feel about that."

"Mama, not again," Ronald groaned. "I'm a grown up man and should be allowed to do whatever I want."

"Not in this house, don't you know that you need to take your life seriously now that..." She looked at Alistair then shook her head. "Never mind, I'm going up to my room. Have the chambermaid come up there at once," she said to no one in particular.

The two men watched her leave then Alistair turned to his brother. "You don't have to keep agitating mother," he said in a quiet voice. "It makes her irritable the whole day."

"Will you get off my back? I have enough of that from mother and certainly don't need to hear it from you." He threw Alistair an impatient look and left the room.

Alistair sighed and absentmindedly picked up a peach from the tray that his stepmother had been eating from. His family was quite complex and he missed someone to talk to. They never had meals together like in days past so he had no idea what his brother was up to. At least, there were no irate Papas beating down the front door and complaining about his philandering ways like before. Ron had gotten into trouble when he started running around with young ladies from the village but it had all stopped when Alistair threatened to send him away.

But he could feel the tension in the house and wondered what was going on. Something was going on between his stepmother and half-brother but he had no idea what it was. They seemed to avoid his presence, then he shrugged, bit into the juicy peach and made his way to his study to go through the estate's books.

Disturbing Thoughts

Sunlight streamed across Leticia's face. She opened her eyes to find solemn brown ones staring down at her.

"Good morning, Nancy," she sat up and pulled her blanket to her chin. "Why are you up this early?"

"It was cold in my bed, Miss Ticia. Can I snuggle with you?"

"Your grandmother would get so annoyed if she found you in my bed," the child's face fell and Leticia moved over. "Just for a short while," she said, and Nancy scrambled into the bed. She was asleep within minutes and Leticia listened to her soft breathing, feeling so much love and compassion welling up within her for the child.

Now that she and Susan had proved that they were really here to work, Leah and George had softened towards them. That's when she found out that this household had its own secrets which were also a bit frightening.

"Lady Monnie was a delightful woman and would have taken to you immediately," Leah had told her just the previous day. "She was kind and gentle and truly loved this child. With her death, poor Nancy lost an ally and Lord Alistair was the one who had to press the duchess to get the child a governess."

Leticia didn't say a word.

"You need to be very careful around that Ronald. He's quite ambitious and a scatterbrain, but his mother thinks he's a prince. The man is lazy and good for nothing; gambling, drinking and philandering run through his blood. He's also very free with his hands and upset previous maids and it's a shame that he was the old duke's son. That's what happens when a noble man marries an unrefined woman, even the offspring are uncouth."

Leticia wanted to object to such generalization but she'd just made an

ally and didn't want to tip the boat. "I don't see much of him because he never comes to the nursery."

Leah snorted, "That good for nothing boy doesn't love his own child. Poor Charlotte shouldn't have agreed to marry him but she was so besotted and besides, her parents weren't there to stop her from getting into the marriage. She was dead within a year and though people say it was child birth, I like to say it was of a broken heart. The ink had barely dried on the marriage licence before the man was already out cavorting with some useless soiled doves," she sniffed. "It broke the poor girl's heart when her husband never came home, especially when she told him that she was with child. Poor girl thought that a child would bring her husband closer but it only drove him away from her. She died in my arms and left the wee lamb. We didn't think the poor lamb would make it past her first year of life, but Lady Monnie, Lord Nelson and Lord Alistair did all they could for her. Her own blood grandmother couldn't be bothered and before Charlotte was in the grave six months, was already searching for another wealthy young woman for him. Good thing is that most of the respectable ladies rejected him and his mama has to content herself with him being single, unless he searches farther afield."

"What about Nancy's maternal family, does she have any?"

"Poor Charlotte was an only child and her parents had her when they were quite old. They died just months before she met Ronald and fell in love with him. Being a very coddled child, she was very innocent in the ways of the world and when Lady Emily made the match, she thought she had found true love. Had her parents still been alive, I doubt that the poor girl would have ended with Ronald. Alistair they might have accepted because he's very responsible but not his brother. Sadly, there was no one to counsel the child on what she was getting herself into. We tried to make her life easy but with a husband like that," Leah shook her head, "That child stood no chance."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Leticia said for lack of anything better to say. She knew that letting Leah gossip about their employers was wrong, but she really wanted to know more about the child she was taking care of. No one would tell her so she had to resort to gossiping for information.

"Don't be, it wasn't your fault or mine. If it were not for Lord Alistair, George and me would be long gone. But someone has to take care of the

next duke and so we stay, even though we haven't seen our wages for many a month. The duke tries to give us a guinea here and another there but it doesn't cover what we're owed. I don't know that you'll be getting yours too, child. There's barely any money to feed us."

Leticia wasn't here for the money but that wasn't something she was willing to divulge. She had found a place to hide out for a year and a day, during which she hoped to have found someone she could present to her parents as her husband. She often wondered if she would find true love and after hearing Charlotte's story, prayed that she would never get desperate enough to fall into the arms of an unsavoury character?

Lady Charlotte Thurmond's sad life made her the more determined that even if she lost her inheritance, she would never enter into a loveless marriage. Her grandmother's will stipulated that if she didn't fall in love and get married within a year and a day, all the money would go to various charities. If all else failed, at least she would have references from the Duke of Great Yarmouth to help her find another posting.

As Leticia listened to the child's soft breathing, her mind wandered to her dashing uncle. Alistair was so different from his brother. He was really kind and came to the nursery twice a day to check on the child. He would always read a story to Nancy and she was thankful that he was there for the child, seeing as her own father and grandmother practically ignored her existence.

He was the kind of man that she could so easily fall in love with, and Leticia got up, making a sound of disgust. He was a duke and she was a nobody and it wouldn't do to have such foolish dreams about him. He was also probably engaged to some wealthy young woman of his social class and would barely spare a glance for an innkeeper's daughter.

* * *

Later that morning as she was teaching Nancy how to paint, she became aware that they weren't alone any more. Summer was here and the hot sun had driven them to sit under one of the large trees

on the front lawn. When she turned to find solemn grey eyes observing her keenly, she blushed and turned back to her student.

“You need to use the paint sparingly,” Leticia told the child gently. “We don’t have much left and I know you still have many more paintings to do.”

“Can we paint tomorrow?”

“Indeed we can, my little artist. If the weather is as good as today’s then you and I shall spend more time under this shady tree and paint to our hearts’ contentment.”

Nancy threw down her brush and hugged Leticia. “I like you very much, Miss Ticia. Will you stay with me forever and forever?”

Leticia laughed self-consciously, knowing that the duke was watching her even though for some reason, he hadn’t made his presence known to his niece. “Forever is a very long time, but let’s just say that I will be with you for as long as you need me.”

Nancy nodded then caught sight of her uncle. “Uncle Duke,” she cried out with childish delight. “Come and see what I painted. Miss Ticia showed me how to paint birds and trees.”

Alistair stepped out from his temporary hiding place and approached his niece. He didn’t mind that her hands were stained with paint. It was wonderful to see her looking so lively and happy. “You seem to have done a very good job of it,” he looked at the various paintings the child had done. “We’ll make an artist of you yet.”

“But I have to use very little paint. It’s nearly finished now,” she pointed at the small box of paint that was nearly empty.

“We’ll have to see about getting you a new one,” Alistair said, smiling at Leticia and was delighted to see her blushing.

Leticia didn’t want the duke to see how unsettling his presence was so she turned to Nancy. “What do you say when someone says they will do something nice for you, Nancy?”

“Thank you, Uncle Duke.”

“Good, now finish up your painting because it will soon be time for

your midday meal and we don't want to keep Leah waiting."

Nancy happily turned back to her painting and Leticia busied herself collecting all their supplies and putting whatever wasn't immediately needed back into the box.

"Do I make you nervous, Miss Leticia?" Alistair asked softly. She shook her head. "Then why are your hands shaking?"

Leticia quickly put her hands in her apron and stood up, then found herself at a disadvantage when Alistair stepped closer. "Please."

"Please what, Miss Leticia? What are you asking me to do?"

"I'm supposed to be minding Nancy and your mother will get upset if she finds me not doing my work."

"I'm not stopping you now, am I?" Alistair knew that he was being rather unfair to the poor woman, but he liked seeing her blush. Her soft and flawless skin was a welcome sight after the powdered faces that he had to look at nearly every day, his stepmother's included. He didn't understand why women marred their features with paints and powders when all they had to do was let nature take care of them.

Leticia was afraid that someone might look out of one of the windows of the manor and see them standing so close. The innocent scene could be misconstrued and the last thing she wanted was to have Lady Emily Thurmond shouting at her. She had some lady friends over for tea and a game of whist and they seemed like tattle tales.

"I..." she sighed. "Your grace, it's not proper for you to be seen in the company of hired servants."

"I'm here simply because I wanted to know how far my niece is progressing, nothing else," and he turned away, leaving her feeling rather foolish. "Since my presence is rather discomfiting, I'll take my leave," he bent down and ruffled Nancy's hair, then without a backward glance, strode away.

She should have felt relieved that he had left, but all she could think about was being close to the duke. He was a man who made her feel safe and she didn't understand why. What was happening

to her?

Matters Of The Heart

Much later that night when she was in bed, Leticia let her thoughts take her back to the events of the day. Had she overstepped her bounds by behaving so foolishly in the presence of her employer? Would he find her unsuitable to take care of his niece and ask the duchess to relieve her of her duties? She didn't want to believe that Alistair Thurmond could be so petty, but with these nobles, one could never tell.

She remembered a time when a certain marquis and his lady had stayed at her father's inn back in Bromley. She'd been working there as a chambermaid when the couple came in and it was obvious theirs was an illicit affair. But that didn't stop the marquis from treating everyone with disdain. He demanded a lot of things for himself and his lady friend and the staff were quite harassed. The lady was no better, dressed in flashy clothes and a heavily painted face, she had reminded Leticia of a painting of French courtesans that she'd seen at the museum in London. The marquis caught one stable boy staring at his lady and the poor lad's ears got boxed. That was the last time Leticia had worked at the inn, knowing that she might not be polite to unruly guests in the future.

Yet Alistair struck her as being different from the nobles she'd met so far. For one, he didn't seem to like the presence of an entourage like many of his peers. He was a loner, spending a lot of time closeted in his study and sometimes even forgetting to go to the dining room for meals. Maybe he was worried about the state of the manor and she felt something like compassion stirring up within her. If only she could offer him her money, but that would be a really foolish thing to do and he looked like a man who wouldn't accept charity from anyone.

What if she walked up to him and told him that she was really an heiress in disguise and could offer him enough money to put his estate back to rights, what would he say?

“Probably have you committed,” she muttered to herself then sighed.

She was getting herself into a fine mess by falling in love with Lord Alistair Thurmond. Her head told her that it was foolishness since before that afternoon, the man had barely acknowledged her existence. But her heart betrayed her and beat hard just for him.

“Oh, what am I going to do?” She murmured, sleep evading her for the second night in a row. And it was all because he’d smiled at her, or perhaps he’d been smiling at his niece, but she felt like the sun had turned its face to shine down on her. She knew she was being foolish but just couldn’t help herself. Was this what love felt like?

Just as her eyes began to droop, she thought she heard something or someone standing outside her bedroom door. Her heart began to beat rapidly even though she knew the person couldn’t gain access into her chamber. Leah had warned her and Susan never to leave their doors unlocked at night.

“This may be a duke’s residence, but you need to be very careful, girls. Keep your chamber doors locked tightly and don’t open them for any reason other than when morning comes. Keep the child’s room locked too,” she had added, for Leticia and Nancy had adjoining rooms only separated by a door. For the sake of the child, she never locked the middle door.

Something scrapped at her door and she held her breath, then she heard someone turning the knob and nearly screamed. The person on the other side sounded frustrated when they couldn’t open the door and after a while, went away.

Leticia sat up in bed, her hand to her mouth. She needed to go and check on Nancy but was really frightened. Had she locked the child’s room or would the intruder gain access through there? That got her out of bed and she sagged against Nancy’s door in relief when she found it locked.

The child had slept through the ruckus, for which Leticia was grateful. She wouldn’t have known what to answer had Nancy woken up to find her looking so terrified and standing in the middle of her bedroom.

For now, the danger seemed to be past and she went back to bed but not before pushing the small chest of drawers in front of the door.

She was quite bleary eyed in the morning but mercifully woke up before Nancy and put the chest back in its place. The knock when it came, startled her and she gave a small cry.

“Who is it?”

“Just me, Miss Leticia,” Susan’s called out. She rushed to the door and opened it then bolted it as soon as her abigail entered the room. “What’s wrong, why do you look so disturbed?”

“Susan,” her voice trembled, “Someone tried to enter my bedchamber last night,” Leticia whispered. “I was so scared and couldn’t go back to sleep properly.”

Susan made a sound of anger. “Who would dare do such a thing?”

“I don’t know, but now I understand why Leah told us to bolt our doors and not open them until morning. Something is going on in this house.”

“You need to be very careful,” Susan whispered. “Last night before I went to bed, Lady Emily told me to go to her son’s bedchamber and get it ready for him.”

“Who, the duke?”

“No,” Susan shook her head. “The other one, Nancy’s father. He was so drunk and tried to compromise me but I managed to ward him off. He fell on the bed and I got out of there as fast as I could. He might have decided to come to your bedchamber after that.”

“What an awful man. Should I tell his mother?”

Susan shook her head. “The woman worships her son and in her eyes, he can do no wrong. Just keep the matter to yourself but we need to tell Leah. She might tell us what to do.”

Over the next few days, Alistair noticed that something was going on in his household. Leticia seemed tense and got startled by the smallest thing. He needed to find out what was going on and what had her so scared, so he summoned the butler and asked him to get her.

"Your grace, you sent for me," Leticia stood nervously at the door.

"Do come in, Miss Leticia and please sit down. How is Nancy faring with her studies?" This when she had sat down or more like perched at the edge of the seat. "Is she giving you any trouble?"

"No, my lord."

"Then what's going on, Miss Leticia?" He stood up from behind his desk and came towards her but was careful to stay a few feet away from her. "You look like something frightened you."

"It's nothing," she wrung her hands helplessly. "Please may I leave now?"

"Not before you tell me what has caused you to be this disturbed. You're usually a very calm and settled person but all I see now is fear. Did someone do something to hurt you?"

"No."

"Then what is it? Please tell me," perhaps it was the fact that she was tired of being scared all the time or the soft and gentle voice, but Leticia soon found herself telling the duke about the intruder.

"Someone tried to enter my bedroom in the night," she said. "It's happened twice."

"Did the person enter and harm you in any way?"

"No, your grace because I always bolt the door to my room and Nancy's. But I'm really scared."

"And so you should be," his lips tightened. He guessed that it was Ronald for the same thing had happened to one or two other servants. The moment they had complained to the duchess, she'd relieved them of their duties, but not before accusing them of stealing from the manor.

“Have you said anything to the duchess?”

“No. I didn’t want to get in trouble with her.”

“You did well,” he said. “Now, don’t tell another soul but keep your room and Nancy’s locked up. No one can come in once the doors are bolted from the inside.”

“Thank you, your grace. May I please leave now before Lady Emily starts searching for me?”

“Of course,” he allowed her to stand up then did something that shocked even him. He drew her gently in his arms and lowered his head, brushing his lips against hers. She was stunned and stood still for a brief moment then broke away with a small cry and fled from the study.

The Fair Maiden

"I shouldn't be having these feelings for you, Leticia," Alistair whispered to himself. He was perched on an outcrop of rocks overlooking the calm North Sea. Immediately after Leticia left his study, he'd found himself yearning for some peace and quiet and only this place could afford him that. He loved this spot because it was one of the few places he could allow his thoughts free reign. His father had brought him out here many years ago when he was still a child, so he could show him the large fishing boats owned by his grandfather. That was before Napoleon's madness had nearly turned the world upside down.

"That's your heritage, son," Lord Nelson had proudly pointed out their boats in the distance. "One day, you'll be responsible for all those boats and also ensuring that London fishmongers never miss an order. When the Creator of the Universe places resources in your hands, it is so that you can use them to benefit mankind. Never forget that."

That had been nearly twenty years previously but now all that was left was one lone boat and even then, it was old and needed a lot of repairs to be done on it. The fishing crew had long since left and the only person who could be relied on was an old skipper. Old Magnus as Alistair had always known him, had started working on the boats many years ago, even before Alistair was born. When the other five boats were destroyed and business went down, he stuck to the old boat and did whatever he could to keep the trade going. Together with his two grandsons, they worked hard, catching what they could and selling it locally because the boat was not strong enough to go out into the deep sea. That meant that they never had any left over for them to make the journey down to London, not that the boat would even have made it that far.

Alistair sighed, ignoring the cold breeze that was blowing from the sea. He hadn't taken his thick jacket because he'd been in a hurry to

get out of the house. Right now, his life was a far cry from what he'd hoped it would be and he knew that he had to make a decision very soon. Things were looking really bad on the estate and they were now feeding from hand to mouth. The debts were piling up each day and extensive repairs and renovations needed to be done on the manor. His only choice was to find a rich heiress and marry her or watch his inheritance go down the drain.

But his heart wanted Leticia. She was kind, gentle and it was obvious that Nancy adored her. He was falling in love with her and he couldn't help it, but she was the wrong woman, according to society. A simple governess with nothing to her name was what she was. He couldn't marry her and bring her to the poverty stricken manor. What kind of husband couldn't provide for his wife and eventually his children?

"This won't do at all....."

"What won't do at all, my lord?" Leticia asked, stepping up behind him.

Her presence startled him for he hadn't realized that he was saying the words out loud. He'd been so deep in thought that he hadn't even heard her approach.

"How did you know where to find me?"

"It was Old George who told me that you and your father liked to come to this spot," she turned to look out to sea. "It looks so peaceful and calm."

"Don't let the present calmness fool you. The sea can be quite treacherous and has claimed the lives of hundreds of men, women and children. But it holds a certain fascination for me and many others. Once a person goes out to sea, there's a pull that never quite goes away no matter how many years a person spends on the land. My grandfather took me out on one of the boats years ago, just before the war with Napoleon started. We spent three nights with the fishermen and I decided then that I wanted to be one of them," he chuckled softly. "Catching fish was so exciting and one of the boats returned with a large whale. I was so excited and wanted to stay on the sea forever." He shook his head. "The dreams of a little boy!"

“Valid dreams,” Leticia turned to look at him and then wished she hadn’t. He was so handsome and her heart stirred within her. “I have to return to the house before Nancy wakes up from her nap.”

“Did you come out here for something, Miss Leticia or was it just to seek out my company,” his intense look made her blush and for a moment, she actually forgot why she had come to the outcrop to look for him. “Miss Leticia?”

“I’m sorry,” she shook her head. “It’s just that this is the safest place for me to speak with you about your niece.”

Alistair frowned slightly. “I don’t understand what you’re saying, Miss Leticia.”

“Nancy is depressed and needs to get out of the house.”

“What do you mean depressed?”

“She’s a very lively little girl and we were beginning to make headway with her studies, but I noticed that she’s also been having very restless nights. She needs some time away from here.”

“We have a house in London and I could make arrangements for us to go there. The house was shut up for repairs and renovations which are not yet complete, but one wing is habitable. I have to send word to my butler to make ready for us. Is that in order?”

“That would be nice, and once in the capital, visits to the museum, the zoo and parks should revive Nancy’s spirit. I’ve lived in London all my life and believe me, she will soon tire of it and just want to come back home to the country.”

“Very well then, thank you for letting me know.”

“Thank you, your grace,” Leticia was finally glad that she had found a way of returning to London even if it would only be for a few days. She missed her parents and wanted to let them know that she was fine without divulging her whereabouts. Writing to them would only have sent them coming up north to try and convince her to come back home and she wasn’t ready to do that. She would visit them on her own terms and leave when she needed to.

Gruesome Suspicions

Leticia stared at Alistair's bowed head and chewed her lip irresolutely. She'd spent a few sleepless nights thinking about the duke and finally decided that she had to speak to him.

Taking a ragged breath, she stepped into the study. Alistair heard the soft footsteps and raised his head. It was pounding and he could barely see. Leticia nearly cried out in alarm when she saw his face. He looked terrible and she wanted to wipe his brow and tell him he would be alright.

He put up his hand and pushed back a lock of his hair from his forehead. He was very pale and Leticia noted with much anxiety that he was sweating.

"Miss Leticia, did you need something?"

"Your grace, you look really ill. Can I get you anything?"

"Just some water," he said. "I think this last pitcher tastes garish and nearly gagged me. Where's Nancy?"

"She's asleep, your grace. I just needed to get some story books for our lessons tomorrow but that can wait, I'll just get you some fresh drinking water, and won't be a moment."

"Thank you." She was gone for less than ten minutes but to Alistair, it felt like a lifetime. His head was pounding and his stomach was churning and the pain was excruciating. He wished he could pull his stomach out of his body and put it away from him.

"Here you go, your grace," Leticia poured out some fresh water from the pitcher and handed it to him. She'd also brought a clean glass and he drank the water in one gulp and asked for more.

"This tastes better than what I had before," he tried for a chuckle but it came out as a cough instead. "If I didn't know better, I would

say that someone is trying to poison me.”

Leticia got the opening she'd been looking for and jumped right in. “What if someone is truly trying to poison you, your grace?”

He raised his tired eyes and observed her for a moment. “You're not making any sense.”

“Sir, you've been summoned to London by the Regent Prince and it can only mean one thing, that finally the title of your father is going to be bestowed on you. Ever since I came to this house almost two months ago, you've been in very good health and Leah says she can't remember a day when you were ill. Suddenly, when the Regent summons you, this strange illness comes upon you. Have you thought about that?”

“Are you trying to say that someone in this household is poisoning me?”

“It would seem that way, your grace.”

“But we always eat from the same dish but no one else seems to be ill.”

“Sir, if I may?”

“Go ahead.”

“When Leah prepares the food, the duchess usually asks her to serve it on the table but then she's not allowed to stay and wait on you. Susan also isn't allowed anywhere near the dining hall.”

“Do you mean to say that Leah, the woman who's been with this family for nearly three decades has suddenly decided to poison me?”

“Leah is innocent, in fact, she was the one who drew my attention to your illness and how strange it is.”

“Really?” She ignored his sardonic gaze.

“Your grace, who stands to benefit from your untimely death?” This was asked very softly and at first, Alistair thought he had imagined it.

“What did you say?”

"I asked you to think about the person who stands to gain most when you die. Your title, the manor and the estate."

"Please do not be making such unsubstantiated allegations, Miss Leticia. Besides, it's not in your place to start casting suspicions on members of the household."

"Your grace...."

"Silence," he roared and she took a step backwards. "Miss Leticia, you're merely my niece's governess but you presume too much."

"I'm sorry, your grace," Leticia wanted to leave and return to her room but the duke's life was in danger and she couldn't let the wicked succeed in their plot to eliminate him. She was in love with him and couldn't imagine losing him.

"And so you should be. In past days, servants would be flogged for being so presumptuous. In any case, what evidence do you have against any one?"

"My lord, Leah told me about your father's illness and how it had started just like your own. He continued ailing until he finally passed away. He would complain of terrible headaches, a churning stomach and weakness of his limbs. Even though the coroner ruled his death as being from normal illness, Leah believes that the late duke was poisoned. And the same thing seems to be happening to you. Please just be careful, your grace."

Alistair thought about Leticia's words and they started making sense. His father had enjoyed good health all his life and then suddenly the illness had come upon him. No amount of treatment worked and he died in a lot of pain.

"If indeed I'm being poisoned, what is the antidote?"

"I've been studying the many herbs and their curative as well as preventive properties and I know just what to get you. But you also need to be careful about what you eat or else it will all be in vain."

"Can you get any of those herbs?"

"Yes, your grace. I've seen quite a number of them growing in the garden and even beyond in the woods. I'll send Susan the chambermaid to fetch some tomorrow and will immediately

prepare your treatment.”

“I hope this isn’t just some attention seeking ploy.”

“No sir.”

“Well thank you,” he tried to stand up but his legs gave in and he fell back on his chair feeling as weak as a kitten. “I can barely walk.”

“Sir, if I may say something please.”

“Go ahead.”

“You’re supposed to travel to London tomorrow but the state of your health is cause for anxiety.”

“What else can I do?” He asked wearily. “When the Regent Prince summons a person to London, it’s imperative that they obey. I wouldn’t want my duchy to be labelled as being rebellious. It’s a terrible thing to disobey when His Royal Highness calls. I just have to go.”

“Of what good will it do for you to arrive in London dead? What will you have solved?”

“Miss Leticia, you’re a very stubborn woman and one would even say you nag.”

“While that may be true, I’m only concerned about your health. You’re all little Nancy has in this life and if something were to happen to you, I don’t want to imagine what that child’s life will turn out to be.”

“She has her father and grandmother,” he said and then moaned when a sharp pain pierced his stomach. “They will take care of her.”

“Do you really believe that?” She asked quietly, her eyes challenging him. He knew that what she was saying was true but how could he refuse to obey an order from the Prince, who would ascend to the throne after his father’s death? Everyone frowned upon his lavish lifestyle and it was clear that he didn’t have that many allies, which was why he usually sought those who supported him.

The Thurmond House had always supported the ruling monarch and Alistair's father had been very good friends with King George III. Alistair missed the days when he would accompany his father to the royal palace to see the king. He even felt a little guilty for not making any attempt to visit the ailing monarch, but he didn't want to be seen as going to beg for hand-outs from his father's old friend. He had his pride and would never shame the Thurmond name.

"The Regent Prince needs me and I should go."

"As I said, your grace, you won't last a long time in your present state of health. I know for a fact that the prince rarely sees anyone as soon as they arrive in London. What I suggest is that you postpone your journey for two days while I see that you get the antidote to whatever is eating you up on the inside."

"Wouldn't it be easier for me to just get my physician to come and treat me?"

"That's an option but he would mostly give you laudanum for the pain and that isn't the cure. My grandmother taught me a lot about herbs and what she didn't know, I got from journals and books in the library in London. Your grace, from the symptoms you're exhibiting, it's clear that you're being poisoned with tobacco. The severe nausea, vomiting, dizziness, extreme fatigue and sweating all point to this. I have to administer fennel seeds, liquorice and rhubarb to help purge your body of the poison ingested and I noticed some growing in the garden at the back of the manor. Travelling will only cause you to get worse, so please consider my humble plea, your grace."

"Thank you for your concern," Alistair felt like his head would explode. He surely couldn't travel and would postpone the journey for another two days then whatever the case, he had to leave for London immediately. "Very well then, work your magic on me, Miss Leticia but let me warn you that even if I don't feel better within two days, I'll have to leave for the capital city."

"I'll do my best, your grace."

Terrible Decisions

“Well, Alistair, you know your own mind best, but I must admit that I’m quite surprised at your reluctance to go to London immediately. You’ve always wanted to be the duke and somehow I expected that you would want to get to London as quickly as you could and receive the title from the Regent,” Ronald said.

“While that is true, dear brother, my health comes first. I’m really sick as you can see and can’t travel. Of what use is a dead duke to the fair citizens of Great Yarmouth? Besides, postponing my travel for two days won’t make much difference. We all know that the Regent rarely sees anyone as soon as they get to his court. There’s a lot of bureaucracy involved in getting to see the prince and it could take as long as a week. So waiting to get to London in two days’ time won’t hurt my chances.”

“That’s what you think. Remember, the letter actually came from the Regent himself ordering you to London. That means that he is waiting for you no matter what you say.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll send a note to the prince to let him know that I’m indisposed and as soon as I’m sufficiently recovered, I’ll go down to London and see him.”

“Suit yourself then, but don’t say I didn’t try to get you to go to London.” After he’d left, Alistair got out of bed and sat on a chair in front of the window. This vantage point allowed him to see the front lawn where Leticia would be with the child. And sure enough, he saw them painting under the large oak tree. He’d managed to get them some more paint and remembered the look of delight in Leticia’s eyes when he’d handed the package to her.

Alistair didn’t believe that his brother’s urging for him to travel to London had anything to do with his desire to see him take the title as the next duke. It was for selfish reasons and he still couldn’t tell exactly what they were.

But he was feeling much better just six hours after Leticia had given him his first dose of whatever concoction she'd prepared. She'd told him that she hadn't been able to find any liquorice but used honey as a substitute. His stomach was settling and he thought perhaps it was because it was being purged. He felt sorry for old George who had to keep emptying the chamber pot, but it was a relief to know that the housewife's remedy that Leticia had prepared for him was working. At this rate, he would be well enough to travel to London in a day or two.

"In that case, I'd like to use the carriage tomorrow," Ron said, returning to Alistair's room a few minutes later. "So you managed to get yourself out of bed?"

"Why? You know that you can't use the horses for sport just when I'm about to travel. I don't want them to get exhausted and wearied."

"You worry too much, Alistair," Ron gave him a mocking looking. "Seeing you lying in bed for the past few hours claiming to be ill is something of a wonder."

"Why would you say that?"

"I've never known you to be ill in your whole life and I'm wondering if perhaps something else isn't going on here, Alistair."

"What do you mean?"

"You're ashamed of going to face the Regent knowing that you've practically run the estate to the ground. If he asks about taxes, what will you tell him? I think that's the reason you don't want to go to London."

"I've never been afraid to face up to any challenges that come my way, Ron, and I'm not going to start now. If the Regent wants to know about the financial state of our estate then I'll oblige him. After all, grandfather's boats were used by the British Navy and sunk by Napoleon. No one ever compensated us for the loss and that's the reason our estate is in dire straits. No one is to blame for the present condition we are in except Napoleon and that's why I'm not afraid to face the Regent. But my health is also important and as soon as I get better, I'll be on my way to London."

Ron sighed and walked to the door. "Well, I'll be using the carriage and don't worry, I won't tire the horses out. Just taking a short journey so don't fret so much, dear brother."

Alistair lay staring at the closed door for a long while, wondering what his brother was up to. After the talk that he'd had with Leticia a few days ago, he began thinking about what had happened in his family. His grandmother's untimely death, his father's illness and demise and then his own ailment. Right now, Leticia was in charge of his meals and she did all she could to ensure that no one else tampered with his food.

Of course, they had to hide the fact from his stepmother and so whenever she insisted on bringing him some food, he would pretend to be too ill to take it and once she left the room, George came in and emptied everything into the chamber pot and he was served food that Leah had prepared and Leticia handled.

Then he remembered the piece of string he'd found tied to the bottom of the balustrade a few weeks ago and had thought it was because of the decorations. What if someone had deliberately tied a string across the staircase, knowing that his grandmother liked walking in the manor at night? Because she wouldn't have been expecting it, it would have been very easy for her to trip on it and fall down the stairs. What if that was what had happened to her? It meant that what Leticia said was true, his stepmother and half-brother were trying to get rid of him.

Goodbye Dear Brother

Numb with shock, Alistair moved to the side as the first spade of earth hit the wooden coffin. In that box was the body of his younger brother. Whatever their past differences, Ron was his brother and losing him so abruptly had shocked and grieved Alistair. They had played together when very young, and in the following years, fought and grown apart. But he'd loved his half-brother even with all his shortcomings. It had never occurred to him that he would bury Ron when he was this young.

Behind him, he could hear his stepmother weeping. Just two days ago, Ron's life had come to a tragic end at the hands of highwaymen. Alistair still shook when he thought about what might have happened. He was supposed to have been in that carriage on his way to London, but his weak stomach and constant headaches had kept him at home. The illness that had assailed him had also saved his life because according to the village constable, the highwaymen had been lying in wait for the carriage. A villager claimed to have seen two strange men hiding in the woods and they seemed to be waiting for something. Many other carriages passed by the road but none was attacked. It was only when the carriage bearing the Thurmond Family Crest was passing that they came out of hiding, drew their weapons and fired upon it, then rode away in a hurry.

The footman who'd been in the carriage with Ron was only slightly injured when the ball grazed his upper arm. He said he'd noticed the two men and tried to urge Ron to stop but he just kept going. Ron had been drunk and wasn't listening to reason.

"Ron, why did you leave me?" Lady Emily wailed. "I have no one left, I just want to die. Why did it have to be you? You weren't supposed to be in that carriage."

Leticia frowned slightly at the duchess's words, wondering if the

other mourners were paying any attention to what she was saying. Looking at them as they observed what was going on, none of them seemed disturbed by Lady Emily's words. Then she remembered that no one was aware of the poisoning of the duke. To them, those were just the words of an anguished and grieving mother. But Leticia knew better and raised her face, only to find Alistair looking at her. A look of understanding seemed to pass between them before they turned to listen to the droning of the vicar.

Alistair, however, noticed people giving him strange looks and it was George who told him what all that was about later in the evening. "Your grace, the rumours have it that you planned to have your brother killed."

"Me?" Alistair had to sit down at the shocking news. "How could I have planned with highwaymen to shoot my brother?"

"The duchess let it be known that you were supposed to have been in that carriage on your way to London, but you instead sent your brother because you knew he would be killed."

"Why would I want Ron dead?"

"His mother claims that the late duke had chosen him to take over after him and you couldn't bear that, so you got rid of him so you could take the title."

"All that is a lie, George."

"While me and a few others know that to be true, many people are listening to what the duchess is saying. There are plans to have you taken down to the parish to be held there until the matter is brought before the Regent. I'm afraid that the two constables of this parish are rather scatterbrains and quite in awe of your stepmother, so they will do as she wills."

Alistair thought about his servant's words and nodded. "Please ask Miss Leticia to come and see me."

"Very well, your grace."

Leticia was watching Nancy as she took her afternoon tea when George brought her the message that the duke wanted to see her. "Your grace," she curtsied and he told her to shut the door.

“Miss Leticia, some information has come to light and I’m a little bit anxious.”

“What is it, your grace?”

“My stepmother is claiming that I sent Ron to London and planned it so the highwaymen would ambush and kill him.”

“But that’s not true, how can anyone believe such false tales?”

“My mother is the duchess and in Great Yarmouth, that counts for something. While many people won’t acknowledge her, others do out of respect for my father and grandfather.”

“But don’t they know that you can never do something so heinous?”

“People believe whatever they want to and especially if presented with false evidence that has been skilfully manipulated. Old George tells me that they plan on handing me over to the village constables and those two men are cronies of my mother.”

“That could put your life in danger, your grace.”

“I also believe that Lady Emily intends to write to the Regent and voice her suspicions. This will mean that I’ll be called to London to answer to these allegations and who knows what else she intends?” He shook his head. “Lady Emily clearly wanted her son to be the next duke and now that he’s gone, she can’t believe that the title is mine. What did I ever do to my stepmother to make her hate me so much and wish me such ill?”

“Your grace, we can never understand human nature because people aren’t what they always seem to be. Your life is in danger and if I may make a suggestion please?”

“Until now, anything you’ve suggested or told me has been for my good. Please go ahead.”

“Why don’t you go and see the Regent in London and explain all things to him? If you get there before your stepmother’s messenger, you’ll find an ear with the Regent and things will then be sorted out. If you delay, things could work against you, your grace.”

“What if my stepmother is waiting for me to make such a move? From the way she mentioned that it wasn’t Ron who was supposed

to have been in the carriage,” he paused for a while then something struck him. “On the morning that Ron left for London, my stepmother was away from home and didn’t see him take the carriage. Else she might have stopped him.”

“Maybe she didn’t want to be home when news of your demise came and that’s why she left very early. There was no way she could have known that your brother was going in your place. Did you send him at all?”

Alistair shook his head. “He just told me that he needed to use the carriage but didn’t mention where he was going. I told him I was going to use it in two days when I got better but he took it anyway. Now that I think about it, I was the one who was supposed to have been in the carriage, not my brother.”

The two fell silent, each lost in the thought of what might have happened had Alistair not fallen ill. He would probably be the one lying in the family plot next to their father and grandmother.

“You need to leave this house at once, your grace.”

“I wholly agree with you but I don’t want you here while I’m not around to protect you. Now that my brother is dead, there’s no telling what Lady Emily might decide to do and I wouldn’t want you to be harmed in any way.”

“I was actually thinking of asking for some time away from my duties just till things calm down but I’m worried about Nancy. Who would take care of her if you and I are both not here?”

“Before you came, Leah used to take care of my niece as well as doing the cooking. But it was getting to be too much for her because she’s not very young and keeping up with Nancy requires a lot of energy. Then the other problem was at night. Leah and George have their own rooms and Nancy is all alone in the nursery. Many times, I would find her waiting for me here in the study and then I would sit through the night with her.”

“What’s going to happen to Nancy then?”

“I really don’t know but I wish I could take her to London with me,” Alistair said. “In that way, I can find someone to take care of her temporarily but my stepmother would never let me take Nancy with

me. Alternatively, I could find someone in the village to come and look after my niece for a few days until you return. How long do you intend to be gone for?"

"About two weeks, until your business with the Regent is concluded. Once you're done, you could then send me a note and I'll prepare to return."

"Does this mean that Miss Crone will be going with you?"

"Yes, your grace," there was no way that Leticia would leave her friend behind, not while the duke wasn't at home. "If you could organize for temporary care for Nancy that would be good. But this has to be done immediately so you can leave as soon as possible."

"George can make the necessary arrangements for me even in my absence. The only thing that might pose a problem is leaving without my stepmother knowing what we're doing. One of the horses was injured when Ron was shot and killed and the remaining two aren't that fast. If Lady Emily decides to pursue, it will be very easy for her to overtake us and cause trouble."

"Then we have to leave at night while she's asleep. That will give us a head start and by the time she thinks of following us, it will require her to find another carriage and horses, giving us more time to put a good distance between us."

"You're right. Send George back to me so I can ask him to arrange for a girl to take care of Nancy. Then prepare yourselves for the journey. My stepmother is very distraught and she usually takes laudanum to help her sleep on such occasions. That will knock her out for about eight hours and if we leave at around midnight, it will be nearly noon tomorrow before she finds out that we're gone. Don't discuss this issue in the hearing of the child so she won't get agitated."

"How will George and Leah explain our absence to Nancy?"

Alistair was touched that Leticia was concerned about his niece even in the midst of whatever lay ahead of them. "Leah has always been able to contain the child and when she knows that you're coming back, she won't give them too much trouble. I just wish we could take her with us."

“I wish for the same thing again but like you said, the duchess might cause a lot of trouble if we take her with us.”

Plans of Wickedness

"I'm really sorry, Nancy. Very sorry about your father," Alistair wished he could spare his lovely niece the pain of knowing she would never see her father again. No child should have to go through the pain of losing both parents and yet that was what had happened to Nancy.

"Old Sam told me that Papa was driving too fast and then some bad men shot him, Uncle Duke." She hadn't stopped talking about what had happened to her father.

"Oh child," he pulled her close, grief marring his handsome features.

"Old Sam said Papa was hurrying to get to London and kept saying he hated you and you would never be the duke," Nancy's words shocked Alistair. He would have to give the temporarily hired stableman a good scolding for discussing such sensitive matters in the presence of the child.

"Miss Ticia?"

"Yes, my love?"

"Papa was always angry and he liked shouting at Uncle Duke. Uncle Duke never shouted back at him. Why was my Papa so angry? Did he hate me? Is that why he never came to see me like Uncle Duke always did?"

"No, no, no," Alistair's hand's tightened around his niece. "Your father loved you very much and liked playing games with me. He was not always angry, it was just our way of having fun."

"But"

"Nancy," Leticia could see the strain on Alistair's face and didn't want to cause him any more pain. Between his recent illness and his

brother's death, the man was a pale shadow of his usual self. "Your uncle is ill and needs to rest. It's late and you also need to get your rest now," Leticia said. George had told her that he'd found someone to take care of the child and the young woman would be arriving early the next morning. She and Susan were already packed and ready to leave and the duke had told her that he was ready too.

But they had to say goodbye to the little girl and it was breaking Leticia's heart to have to leave her behind. According to Susan, who'd attended the duchess, the woman was fast asleep after taking a full bottle of laudanum. She wouldn't give them any trouble at all.

"Miss Ticia, will you read me as story before I sleep?"

"But of course," Leticia picked up Nancy's favourite story book and motioned for the duke to leave.

"Goodnight, little one," he stood up, kissed her forehead and then quickly turned away. Leticia thought she saw a sheen of tears in his eyes but couldn't be too sure. The parting was very emotional and it was a good thing that Nancy would be deep asleep when they slipped away.

Before she even turned the second page over, the little girl's eyes closed and her even breathing told her that she was asleep. Leticia waited a few more minutes before kissing her forehead, careful not to let her tears fall on the child's face. She then slipped out of the room, closing the door softly behind her and went in search of Susan.

"Are you ready?" She whispered and her abigail nodded. "We're supposed to walk down to the end of the driveway where the duke will bring the carriage just in case the duchess decides to check outside her window."

"That one is dead to the world, but good thing we don't have much luggage to haul down the driveway. I have to say goodbye to Leah and George."

"Let's go and find them," Leticia said.

It was an emotional parting for the three ladies and as they hurried down the driveway in the dark, both were wiping their eyes. Even Old George had to blink rapidly several times to dispel the cinders

that had fallen in them, or so he claimed, though Leah kept a very clean kitchen. The elderly woman had been so kind to them in the nearly three months that they'd been on the estate and they would miss her. But most of all, Leticia would miss Nancy so much.

"She'll be alright, Miss Leticia," Susan whispered in the darkness.

"Oh Susan, I just wish we were able to take her with us. I know Leah and George will take good care of her but she'll be so lonely without her uncle."

"Nancy is a special child and Leah told me that the young lady coming to take care of her is from a good family and has been helping take care of her younger siblings. Perhaps it's a good thing that you're taking some time away from little Nancy."

"Why would you even say something like that, Susan?"

"The child was getting too attached to you and it's not good. What happens after a year when you have to leave?"

"I hadn't intended to leave for a while, by which time I'm sure the duke would have found a suitable replacement for me."

"It doesn't happen that way, at least not with children like Nancy. She's the kind of child who gets so attached to a person that getting them away is like tearing her heart out. That's how you are, Miss Leticia. Why do you think I've lasted this long with you?"

"Why?"

"You're so kind and loveable and people can't help doing things for you. When I came to work for your family seven years ago, I was just relieving your last lady's maid. Your mother wanted me to go and work for another family because she thought a governess would suit you better, but each time she mentioned that I had to leave, you became very ill. Your father was the one who said I didn't have to leave your household so I stayed. You were so attached to me and couldn't bear me to go away and so here we are. Though you were sixteen and on the threshold of adulthood, you were still very much a little girl inside, Miss Leticia."

"I've never thought of it like that, Susan. I just know that you're my best friend and can't imagine not being with you. Even then, I

couldn't bear to let you go."

Susan smiled in the dark even though she knew her mistress couldn't see her. "We're here but I don't see the carriage or the duke. Do you think he's changed his mind after all?"

"We were to get here and wait for him to bring the carriage out of the stable. Listen," they stopped and listen and sure enough, there was the sound of a carriage coming towards them. "But we have to make sure it's the duke and not someone else."

"Do you think there could be anyone else bringing out the ducal carriage at this time?"

"If Lady Emily found out about our plan, she can try to stop us from leaving. You do realize that she hasn't paid our wages in all the time we've been here. Losing servants like us will force her to find others who might demand to be paid."

"Let's wait and find out who it is."

The carriage stopped at the large gates which were no longer attended by guards because the duchess had said there was nothing valuable worth stealing from the manor. One of them was half broken and creaked in the gentle midnight breeze.

Had she been alone, Leticia doubted that she would have ventured out of the manor at this hour.

"Miss Leticia?" The duke's voice came from ahead of them and they walked towards him. "Did you have any problems getting here?"

"No, your grace. What about you?"

"Just fear that the duchess would wake up and try to stop me. But she sleeps on, so we can begin our journey."

* * *

Leticia didn't want any of her travelling companions to know that she was crying so she covered her face with a soft blanket and pretended to be asleep. The duke was a good horseman but in the dark, he had to be careful so that none of the two aged horses

would get injured. They couldn't afford to lose any of the horses at this time.

She dreaded getting to the end of their journey because she knew it would probably be the last time that she would see her love again. Clearly, once the duchess found out that she was gone, there was no way she would allow her to return to the manor again. She wished that they didn't have to make this journey, but then silently berated herself for being selfish. Alistair was running away to save his life and that was all that mattered.

The distance to the nearest inn where they could change their horses was about eight miles but it took them twice the normal time to get there. It was nearly dawn when the weary travellers got down from the carriage to have some refreshments while the duke saw to the change of horses.

"Miss Leticia?"

"Yes, Susan?"

"I think there's a really big rat in the carriage. I didn't want to say anything before because I didn't want to have to ask the duke to stop and time is of the essence here."

"Well, I'll ask him to check under the seat before we resume our journey. Now, go and attend to your needs quickly because we have to get going. By the time the duchess wakes up, we want to be halfway to London so that even if she thinks about following us, we'll have made good progress."

Alistair made sure the horses they got were good enough for them to make good progress to the next stage stop and then came to check on the ladies. "Are you alright, Miss Leticia?" She was standing outside the inn, staring at the carriage. "Why didn't you want to rest inside the inn?"

"Just in case anyone who knows you sees us and goes to report to the duchess. I don't want to cause any trouble for you, your grace."

"That can't be avoided. When the duchess wakes up and finds out that we're both missing, she'll correctly conclude that we fled together. She might just get it into her head to claim that we eloped."

“I’m sorry, your grace.”

“Don’t be,” he looked around. “Where’s your handmaid?”

“Just taking care of something inside but she’ll soon be out. Susan also mentioned that there might be a rat under the seat and she says it’s a really big one.”

Alistair frowned and opened the carriage door, peering into the semi-darkness. He couldn’t see a thing. “Let me borrow a lantern from the innkeeper,” he was gone for a few minutes and returned with a small lantern. “Stand back just in case I have to forcefully expel the intruder from the carriage.”

Leticia didn’t like rodents and kept a respectful distance. “Be careful,” she found herself saying then blushed when Alistair threw her an amused look. She was glad that he couldn’t see her face.

“It’s only a rat, Miss Leticia. Or it could just have been the wind blowing on Miss Susan’s feet. This is an old carriage which needs repairs and Ron’s accident a few days ago caused more damage to it. There wasn’t time to make any repairs.”

He opened the door and put the lantern on the floor of the carriage, then reached for a rod that was affixed to the carriage and which came in handy when it got stuck in the mud or as a weapon. He could see a thick blanket and wondered that he hadn’t noticed it when he was getting the carriage out of the stable. His mind had been on getting off the estate without his stepmother being aware of whatever was going on.

He prodded the blanket, hoping to chase the rodent out so he wouldn’t have to kill it. Cleaning the carriage after a fight with a big rat wasn’t something he wanted to do, not at this time.

“Stop,” he heard a muffled voice and his eyes widened in surprise.

“What is going on here?” He grabbed the blanket and pulled it roughly. “My goodness,” he exclaimed loudly and Leticia heard him. Susan had joined her and the two ladies took a further step backwards.

“Come and have a look at your rat, Miss Leticia.” They hesitated at first. “Come on, it can’t and won’t harm you.”

"Is it already dead?" Leticia was glad they wouldn't have to deal with the small intruder. A rat was a rat, no matter its size, but she also didn't like seeing dead things.

"Just get here and see this rat," he sounded amused.

Leticia was first at the door and the duke pointed at the blanket. "That's your rat, Miss Leticia."

"Oh my goodness! Nancy, what are you doing here?" Leticia couldn't believe her eyes. "How did you get here?"

"I heard you and Uncle Duke talking in the study yesterday and saying you were going to London and would leave me behind," now that her hiding place had been discovered, Nancy scrambled to free herself from the enfolding blanket. "Please don't make me go back there."

"What will your grandmother say when she wakes up to find that you're missing? She might say that we've abducted you," Leticia reached for the girl and held her close. "You've been a very naughty girl. But I thought you were asleep."

Nancy giggled. "I was pretending because I wanted you to leave my room so I could go down to the stable and hide in the carriage."

"I checked on you before we left and you were in bed."

"When you and Susan left the house, I slipped out through the window in Uncle Duke's study and ran around to the stable. He was checking on the horses and didn't see me when I got into the carriage."

"That was a very dangerous thing to do," Alistair didn't have the heart to scold his niece. He'd been worried about how she would fare on his and Leticia's absence. "I have a mind to return you to the manor."

"I will just run away again," the child answered, raising her stubborn chin at him. "Please Uncle Duke, let me come with you to London. I promise to be a good girl."

"Wait here with Miss Susan," he told her, taking Leticia's arm and leading her away. When he was sure they couldn't be overheard, he turned to her. "What are we going to do about this child?"

“Take her to London with us. We can’t afford to drive back to the manor because your stepmother will never let us leave again.”

“What if she claims that I’ve abducted my brother’s child?”

“We’ll deal with that should it arise. Right now, our main focus should be on getting back on the road. It’s nearly morning and we don’t want to give the duchess a chance to catch up with us before you get to London and see the Regent.”

“I really have a bad feeling about this,” Alistair muttered.

“Your grace, it has happened and there’s nothing we can do. Let’s just pray that all is well and you might mention to the prince that you have your niece with you so it won’t become a problem again.”

“Very well then, shall we go?”

Disturbing Occurrences

"I don't know what happened here but I'm troubled, Mother," Leticia looked around at what used to be their house. She'd only been gone for only about ninety days and her mother seemed to have gone overboard with renovations and the interior decor. "What's all this?"

"I felt that it was time that we changed a number of things around the house and I took the liberty of ordering new furniture as well as carrying out much needed repairs. Is that such a bad thing?"

"Mama, I'm not saying that making repairs where necessary is wrong, but all this?" She waved a hand indicating the new paintings, drapes and furniture. "If we carry on at this rate, whatever grandma left will soon be gone and I'll still have no dowry."

"It's because of you that I did all this, Leticia. Many distinguished men and their mothers have been calling for you and I had to tell them that you were in Paris studying under a Frenchwoman because you wanted to improve your skills. We want them to see that you come from a good home otherwise they will treat you shabbily."

"Why did you lie to those people, Mother? I'm not ashamed to be a governess." Her father wasn't home, for which she was glad.

"There's no way that I was going to tell anyone that my daughter, who's now an heiress, is working as a governess for some family in a place that I don't even know. Three months have gone by since you left and I hope you've finally come to your senses and returned home for good."

Leticia sat down for a while, wondering how to broach the subject of Nancy to her mother. She had begged Alistair to let her stay with the child while he did his business in London and he'd agreed. The

only problem she faced right now was informing her parents about the duke. She didn't want them putting any pressure on Alistair for whatever reason and knowing her mother, she was capable of doing just that. The fact that Nancy would be staying at their house meant that Alistair would also be calling soon. She knew that her parents would definitely want to know who he was. The moment her mother learnt that he was a duke, she would have no peace.

"Mother, there's something that I need to tell you but I don't want you to over react in any way."

"What is it?" Her mother suddenly looked anxious. "I pray that you didn't get yourself into any kind of trouble while you were away from home."

Leticia knew exactly what her mother meant and shook her head. "Have no worries, Mama. There's no fear of you ever having any illegitimate grandchildren. You taught me well and I respect you too much to break your heart in that way."

"Then what is it? You're making me really nervous, Leticia."

"For the last three months, I've been working as governess for a family up in Great Yarmouth. Recently the child I'm minding lost her father in a tragic accident."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, is that why you're here? The family couldn't afford to keep you on so they let you go?"

Leticia smiled at the relief on her mother's face. "Mama, nothing like that. Nancy lost her father and her uncle had to travel to London for some business. I asked for some time away from work and Lor.... Alistair decided to bring Nancy with him to London. The only problem is that she can't be with him all day and I came to ask if she can come and stay here for a few days."

"But of course, my dear. Is this uncle married?"

"Mother!"

"I'd just like to find out if he's a good person and whether or not he's married. You deserve someone good."

"Please don't ever mention that, should he ever come here because I know he'll come to check on his niece. Alistair is a very busy man

and the last thing he needs is to be unnecessarily questioned or made to feel like we want something from him.”

“I’ll try not to be such a bother,” her mother stood up. “Where is the child at this moment?”

“I left her in the waiting carriage with Susan and I’m sorry to just drop this on you at such short notice. She’s really lovely and you’ll like her.”

“Well, go and bring her in, I’d very much like to meet her.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Leticia rose to her feet, kissed her mother on the cheek and went to bring in her new visitor. She didn’t see the thoughtful look in her mother’s eyes.

* * *

Leticia wasn’t quite surprised when the very next day, Lord Spencer showed up at her parents’ house. She’d been expecting that once he heard she had returned, he would come calling. As usual, he was smartly dressed and looked very handsome but her heart didn’t flip the way it usually did when she saw Alistair. “This looks more like it,” he appraised their house and Leticia wanted to scream for him to leave. “Did you miss me while you were gone?”

“I’ve been very busy taking care of this child,” she had Nancy on her lap. The child was dozing off because it was time for her afternoon nap. “She recently lost her father so things have been very difficult for her,” she deliberately evaded his question.

“While you were gone, did you give any more thought to my proposal?”

“To be honest, that didn’t cross my mind. Didn’t you hear what I just said? My charge lost her father and I had to take care of her.”

“Thinking about marrying me shouldn’t take you a three whole months. You know that I’ve been asking you for a while and you’ve been putting me off. And in any case, I thought your mother said that you were in Paris.”

"That was part of my duties," she didn't want to make her mother out to be a liar before this man that she disliked so much. "Would you please excuse me?" She didn't wait for his permission and because she knew it would irk him, got to her feet, Nancy in her arms. The child was getting heavy and she needed to put her down. Giving him what could pass for an apologetic look, she left the living room, hoping that he'd be gone by the time she returned. Even though Nancy was asleep immediately when her head touched the pillow, Leticia still took time to return to Spencer.

She had to admit that her mother had done a good job with her bedroom. It looked bigger and better and she finally had the large poster bed that she'd been dreaming of for a long time. Nancy had refused to sleep in a room by herself and Leticia gave in and allowed her to share her room.

But Spencer hadn't left and jumped at the chance of taking afternoon tea with Leticia and her family, much to her chagrin. Politeness and a good upbringing were the only reasons that she sat through the nearly two hours of torture as she would later remark to Susan. She noticed that there was a new female servant in the house and it made her quite uncomfortable. Her mother's blatant display of affluence was unnerving and it was obvious that Spencer would now never leave her alone. She almost wished that she hadn't left Great Yarmouth.

"You're very quiet this afternoon, my love," he turned to her and she kept her head down. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm alright, thank you for asking," she said softly.

"I was just telling your parents that I'll be calling on you tomorrow so we can go riding. I acquired a new pair of fine horses and a phaeton which was specially built for me. It's time for us to be seen in public so everyone knows that we'll soon be married." He smiled and she was reminded of Charles Perrault's story of the wolf lying in wait for Little Red Riding Hood. She and Nancy had laughed about the wolf's big ears, eyes and mouth and she'd even read the story to the child in French.

Leticia was sure that Spencer had obtained the horses and phaeton on credit and must have flaunted her inheritance, probably telling

his creditors that he would soon marry an heiress. Riding out in the open with him would be confirmation of his false tales and she wasn't going to do it.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," she bowed lightly. "Tomorrow isn't such a good day for riding. Nancy isn't feeling well because of the change of weather and so I can't take her out tomorrow."

"Why would you encumber yourself with that child? Don't you have servants to do it?"

"My lord, Nancy's family entrusted her well-being to me and I promised that I would take very good care of her. She's a little girl and doesn't take too easily to strangers. The last thing I want is for her to feel traumatized or think that I've abandoned her. When she gets better, we shall both be your companions on a ride."

Spencer looked like he was about to say something but Leticia's father cleared his throat softly. "My lord, it would be my pleasure to take a look at your fine pair. I've been thinking about acquiring one or two more horses for my stables and would welcome your wise counsel."

Leticia gave an inward sigh of relief when Spencer turned to her father. Soon it was time for the women to retire to the drawing room while the men went to the study to share a pint of whiskey. It was unusual for her father to drink so early in the day but he was entertaining a baron and clearly wanted to impress him.

"Leticia, do you think it's wise for you to agitate Lord Spencer so much?" Lucinda was immediately upon her daughter.

"Mama, at least please let me sit down so I can digest the lovely high tea that we've just enjoyed."

"I'll never understand you, Leticia. Why do you keep putting Spencer off? He's a remarkable man and clearly eager to marry you."

"For my money, Mama. I'm sure that he got the horses and carriage on credit and used my name as collateral," she said angrily. "How is it that people are spending my inheritance without my permission?"

"Leticia, that's not a nice thing to say."

“I mean it, Mama. Lord Spencer is a gambler, wastrel and spendthrift. His estate is in shambles and yet he can afford to buy new horses and a phaeton. What kind of a husband will he make, mother? I’ll tell you what kind he’ll be; the kind who will quickly go through his wife’s inheritance and when they’re broke, will find a reason to get rid of her either by divorce or death, so he can move on to the next heiress. I love you but on this one, my mind is completely made up, Mother. I will never marry Lord Spencer, not in this lifetime.” My heart belongs to Alistair, she silently added to herself.

Kidnapped

A few days later, Leticia couldn't believe that Spencer could be so persistent. She'd once again rejected yet another proposal from him a few minutes ago and he'd walked out of her father's house angrily. Susan came into the drawing room just as she was thinking about going back to her bedroom. Her face was creased in a frown and she was clearly troubled about something.

"Susan, why do you look so troubled? Is it that new maid again?" Lucinda had employed a new chambermaid who didn't seem to know anything even though she claimed to have worked for a middle class family before. She was also rude and didn't take kindly to being corrected and was getting on everyone's nerves. "I'll ask Mama to get rid of that girl. I found her scolding Nancy and wanted to run her out of this house myself."

Susan shook her head. "Bilha is a problem yes, but that's not the reason I've come to find you."

"Is there something wrong with Nancy? I left her sleeping a few minutes ago when Bilha came to tell me that Spencer was here."

"No, Miss Leticia it's about Lord Spencer. You really have to be careful about that man, Leticia. He's desperate enough to do something really bad to you."

"Pshaw!" She dismissed her maid. "Spencer is just a greedy man who wants what he can't have and thinks that by coming here every day, he'll get me to change my mind. The London Season is about to begin and he will soon find himself some naive rich girl to marry and will lose interest in me."

"While that might be true, I still think you should be careful."

"Thank you, Susan," and Leticia promised to be careful.

The next day, Lord Alistair sent a messenger with his calling card,

requesting permission to visit and she was so excited. She noticed that he had used an ordinary card and not the one that bore his crest, and was glad. She hadn't seen him for nearly a week and her heart was racing by the time her parents sent Susan to inform her that he had arrived.

"Those stars in your eyes are a dead giveaway that you're head over heels in love with the Duke of Great Yarmouth, Miss Leticia."

"Oh Susan, is it so obvious?"

Susan nodded. "Your Mama will take one look and race the two of you to the altar. And just so you know, Lord Spencer has also made an appearance."

Leticia groaned very loudly. "That man is such a bother, Susan. How will I ever get him to leave me alone?"

"The best thing you can do is find another husband and very fast. The man is determined to marry you and get his greedy hands on your inheritance, Miss Leticia. Why your Mama can't see that, is what troubles me."

"Mama has a good heart and sees the best in all people, even the most vile. She was brought up in an era when nobility meant dignity, not what it's become today. In her mind, all noblemen are dignified and have good intentions, though she actually rejected three suitors with titles."

"In any case, I thought you should know that Lord Spencer is also downstairs in the drawing room. You need to hurry before your mama sends someone else to find you."

"Thank you, Susan."

Just as Susan had said, Spencer was in the living room pacing around as if marking his territory. Her parents were seated together on one of the couches while Alistair sat opposite them. She stood unnoticed in the doorway and in those few moments, drank in his handsome face. She had really missed him, but being mindful of Susan's words, took a deep breath and hoped that her face wouldn't be so open.

She stepped into the drawing room and curtsied, "Your grace."

Alistair stood up, careful not to give any of his feelings away. Seeing Leticia after a week of being apart was like receiving a glass of refreshing water on a hot summer's day. "Miss Leticia."

"Welcome to our home. I believe you've met my parents."

"Not really," Alistair turned to her mother. "You're a very charming lady, Mrs. Holmes and it's my pleasure to make your acquaintance. Mr. Holmes, you have a very beautiful home."

Leticia was surprised to see her mother blushing like a school girl. "Mama, Papa, this is Lord Alistair Thurmond, the Duke of Great Yarmouth and Nancy's uncle."

"Oh dear," Lucinda put a hand to her chest, clearly troubled because she hadn't performed the necessary graces required when a duke visited one's house. "Please forgive our manners," she said, clearly having forgotten all about Spencer who was only a baron. A duke was in her living room and she was so flustered. He was really handsome too and the way he was looking at her daughter filled her heart with hope.

"Please don't trouble yourself on my behalf, Mrs. Holmes. It was an unplanned visit because I needed to check in on Miss Leticia and my niece just to find out how they're faring."

"We're honoured to receive you into our home, your grace," Fenton was used to dealing with a lot of noblemen and women because they often stopped at his inn for rest, refreshments or to change horses and so fared better than his wife. "Leticia didn't tell me that her charge's uncle was a duke," and the look he turned on her told her that there would be some explaining to do later.

"Please don't be upset at Miss Leticia for the title was only conferred on me two days ago."

Leticia was happy to hear that Alistair now held the title legally. There was nothing his stepmother could do and she prayed that the woman wouldn't try to harm him again. In any case, she had no other sons to inherit the title and Nancy was still very young. But a desperate woman could be dangerous.

"If you'll permit me, may I speak with your daughter so I can find out how my niece is doing?"

“You’re welcome.”

Spencer stepped in and Lucinda put a hand to her heart. She had completely forgotten about their other guest. “Your grace, pardon me for not introducing Lord Spencer Harrington to you.”

The two men sized each other up before Alistair decided that this man was dangerous. He was a good judge of character and what he saw in Spencer’s eyes troubled him and he wondered why that was so.

“Your grace,” clearly it was with much effort that Spencer followed protocol but he didn’t stay long after that.

Leticia’s parents left the living room so they could talk and her mother said she was going to prepare the child for the visit.

“Miss Leticia,” Alistair found himself holding her hands. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“Your grace, hearing that you’ve come into your title is joy for me.”

“Only that?” He looked slightly disappointed. “I thought you might have missed me,” he teased and was rewarded with a blush. “I’ve been counting the days till I could see you again.”

“Please tell me how it was, did you meet the Regent?”

“I most certainly did and he told me something very interesting. Shall we sit down for this?” He led her to the couch that had recently been vacated by her parents. “I like your parents, they’re such good folk. Why did you make me believe that you were a very poor young woman?”

Leticia knew that it was just a matter of time before he found out about her vast inheritance but hoped it wouldn’t be so soon. “I needed some time away from home so I decided to take on a job as a governess. But please tell me, what did the Regent say?”

“Apparently someone, and I suspect that it’s my stepmother, had sent a letter saying that I was indisposed and unable to take the title. There was a recommendation by some people in the duchy and signatures had been collected, that Ronald should be the next duke.”

“What?”

“Well, that was the reason the Regent had sent for me in the first place. I told him all about Ron’s accident and the rumours back home and he brushed them all aside. I didn’t think it would take me this long but finally I’m the duke after my father and grandfather.”

“Congratulations, your grace.”

“Miss Leticia” but whatever else he was about to say was cut off when Nancy came hurtling into the living room at full speed. Lucinda was behind her and when she was sure the child was alright, closed the door and left the three of them alone.

“Uncle Duke, you came just like Miss Ticia said you would.”

“Of course, I had to come and see you, my little darling. Have you been giving Miss Ticia any trouble?”

“No, Uncle Duke. I’ve been a good girl and Mrs. Cinda said she will get the cook to bake me a chocolate cake.”

“That’s very kind of her,” Alistair said. “I have a hired chaise and would like to take the two of you out on a ride.”

“Would it be alright if Susan came with us too? My mother won’t let me leave the house without her.”

“Very well then.”

* * *

The ride went very well and Nancy was having a wonderful time. Susan was watching her most of the time while Alistair and Leticia strolled down the garden paths. They met some acquaintances of Alistair’s, Pearl and Martin Platt, who had a daughter of the same age as Nancy. Alistair and Martin had been at Eton years ago and remained well acquainted. They asked Alistair to allow the two girls to play together.

“When they’re exhausted, we’ll bring Nancy back to you,” Pearl promised.

“Very well then, but Susan will come with you so she can help with Nancy,” Leticia looked at Alistair who nodded. They left the party settling down for a picnic and decided to stroll around the park.

Alistair had brought them to St. James Park so Nancy could see the pelicans and other birds.

“This is so beautiful but I miss Great Yarmouth,” she found herself saying.

“Tell me something, is Lord Spencer related to you in any way? I noticed that he didn’t seem too pleased to see me.”

“Lord Spencer is a baron.”

“I know that. I knew his father, a very fine man but had never met the son.”

“He’s been coming to ask for my hand in marriage but I’ve told him that I’m not interested.”

“You could give love a chance.”

“Your grace...”

“My name is Alistair and I charge you to please use it.”

“Not in public for that would be against propriety.”

“Whatever you say. Tell me about this baron who wants to marry you?”

“There’s not much to tell. He’s just not suitable for me as a husband.”

“What kind of a husband are you looking for, Miss Leticia?”

“Someone who is kind, gentle and dignified. A man who will love and cherish me,” she finished softly.

“Do you have anyone in mind?” Alistair’s voice was equally soft. “Is there someone that you think about so much, wish to be with all the time and hope to spend the rest of your life with?”

“I....”

“Miss Leticia, you’ve got to come quick,” Bilha burst upon them.

“What is it, Bilha?”

“Your mother sent me to get you, your father has suddenly taken ill and it’s looking really bad.”

“What?”

“I’ll come with you right away,” Alistair took over when he saw Leticia’s shattered look. “Lead the way.”

“What about Susan and Nancy, we can’t leave them in the park.”

“Susan has a good head on her shoulders and will bring the child back. Besides, Pearl and Martin will take good care of them.” Alistair turned to Bilha. “Find Susan and tell my friends what has happened. We need to find a cab right away?”

“Your grace, I already found one. Mrs. Holmes sent the family chaise to get the doctor so she told me to find and hire one. Please, let’s go.”

Leticia was so worried about her father that she couldn’t even speak. Alistair took her in his arms once they were in the covered chaise. “Your father will be alright, he looks like a really strong man and will pull through.”

“Oh Alistair, I’m so scared. What will mama do should something happen to papa? They’re so much in love and one can’t live without the other.” She was really glad that he was with her. His presence brought her comfort and reassurance that all would be well.

“Hush, little one. Your father will be alright.”

Leticia expected that they would soon be at her house and was surprised that the short journey was taking too long. She happened to glance outside the window and gave a startled exclamation. “This isn’t the way home, we’re going further away than we should.”

“Stop,” Alistair rapped on the chaise wall but the driver only increased speed. “I have a bad feeling about this,” he said. “Brace yourself for trouble,” he told her, then pushed open the door and tried to get to the driver. The man was caught off guard and reined in the horses, causing Alistair to lose his footing and he went flying off the chaise, landing on the ground with a sickening thud.

“Alistair,” Leticia didn’t think about her own safety but jumped out of the still moving chaise. She ran back to Alistair and found him lying unconscious, bleeding from a small wound on his forehead. Before she could attend to him, strong hands grabbed her and when she tried to scream and struggle, a large hand was placed over her mouth. Her eyes widened in horror as she observed a second man lifting the still unconscious Alistair and tossing him back into the chaise.

“Don’t give me any trouble, little lady,” a gruff voice spoke and she nearly gagged. His mouth reeked of stale beer and onions and the stench from his body was quite overwhelming.

“Who are you and what do you want?” Leticia said immediately when she was put not so gently into the chaise. “Where are you taking us?”

She opened her mouth to scream but was given a blow to the head, which rendered her unconscious.

Saved

Cramped on the cold, hard floor listening to Alistair's laboured breathing, Leticia tried to pass the time by thinking happy thoughts. She wasn't alone in the dark room and even though he was unconscious, Alistair was there with her. The man she loved hadn't left her alone and he'd tried to save her. He'd held her in his arms and even though it had been very briefly, she'd felt his comfort.

But ugly thoughts also had their way in her mind. They were going to die! Was the thought that kept interrupting her happy ones.

"Alistair, my love," she whispered, reaching out a hand to touch him. His flesh was hot, and his temperature was really high but at least he was still alive. "Please hold on, help is coming." She wondered who had sent the kidnappers. Her first thought was that his stepmother had done the wicked deed, but then she ruled her out. Lady Emily wouldn't dare do such a thing in London and her next thought moved to Spencer. He was the most likely suspect and it was clear that Bilha had been his accomplice or else he'd paid her to deceive and lead them into the chaise. She wondered if her father was alright and prayed that he would be. She also prayed that Bilha wouldn't hurt Nancy and Susan.

There was a scrapping noise at the door and Leticia bit back a scream. She was hungry, cold and now it seemed like rodents were about to come in and feast on her and Alistair. If only they had some light with which to see.

The scrapping stopped and she sighed in relief, only to cover her mouth as the door slowly opened. She stared with dread at the figure that loomed large in the doorway.

"I'm not here to harm you, but to help you," a deep voice spoke and she squinted in the darkness, trying to see who it was. One thing she was sure of, however, was that it wasn't Spencer nor the other two captors. For one, this person's voice was cultured and he didn't

reek of stale beer and onions.

“Who are you?” She finally got the courage to ask.

“Who I am isn’t important, but I need to get the two of you out of here very fast. It will soon be dawn and then it might be too late to save you. Can you walk?” She hadn’t realized that they’d been in captivity for quite a while.

“Yes, sir, but Lord Alistair took a really bad fall and is still unconscious.”

“Where is he?”

“Right here beside me,” Leticia said. “How do we get him out of here?”

She was surprised when the man hoisted Alistair onto his shoulder as if he weighed no more than a feather. “Follow me very closely. Don’t pay attention to anyone or anything, in fact, hold on to my coat and I’ll lead the way.”

“Yes, sir,” her voice trembled and she cleared her throat. She had no idea what lay ahead of them but anything was better than the hole they’d been put in. With her head bowed down, Leticia was only aware of them passing through some kind of tavern and ignored the uncouth swearing and shouting following them. They soon stepped out into an alley and their saviour urged her to walk in front of him. “Keep moving and don’t stop for any reason until I tell you to,” he told her and she practically ran. His deep voice guided her through what she felt was a maze of alleys until finally they emerged behind a small field. In the early light of day, she could see a wall before them and the man led her towards it.

“We’re here now,” he slipped through an opening in the broken wall and walked a short distance then stopped. Leticia bumped into him but ignored the dull pain in her head. She knew that she had a large bruise at the back of her head where her captor had struck her. They were standing beside an old church which looked abandoned but she didn’t care. This man posed no threat to her and Alistair, at least she prayed that it was so.

“Sorry, but I didn’t leave a candle on. Wait here while I light one.” He entered and took a few minutes then returned.

It was a small room with a bed, chair and table. Alistair was lying on the narrow bed. "This will have to do for now," the man said. "Let me get you some water to clean Lord Alistair's wounds and then I'll see to that large bump on your head."

* * *

"Where am I?" Alistair sat up and took a look around the room. Through the single small window in the room, he could see that the sun was shining outside but the room was still cast in shadows. "Leticia?" His heart filled with horror when he remembered what had happened to them.

The door opened and a large man entered the room. "You're awake, your grace," the man bowed in reverence and Alistair wondered who he was. He couldn't see his face. "This little lady was really worried about you, hasn't slept in two days but exhaustion finally took over."

"Did you hurt her?"

The man chuckled softly. "Why would I do that? I wasn't the one who kidnapped the two of you."

"Who did?"

"Have you heard of Lord Spencer?"

"I met him at Leticia's parents' house. Apparently he's been trying to get her to marry him."

"And with good reason too."

"What do you mean?"

The man was still standing in the shadows observing him. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what? What's going on here?" He tried to rise up but his head was spinning so he lay back against the pillows. "Who kidnapped us and for what reason? I don't have anything to give by way of ransom and neither does Leticia. She comes from a very simple family."

“Miss Leticia Holmes is a very wealthy heiress through her maternal grandmother. That’s the reason that little idiot is trying to force her to marry him, so he can get his hands on her wealth.”

“She never told me any of this,” Alistair closed his eyes. This changed everything. He’d been thinking about asking for Leticia’s hand in marriage on the morning that he called on her. While they were out in the park, he’d been trying to find the words with which to express his feeling for her but then they were interrupted. Though he had nothing to offer, he was sure that they could work together on the estate and put things right. It would take a long while but he believed that together they would succeed. Now only to find out that she was a wealthy heiress all along. What kind of game had she been playing?

While he kept slipping in and out of unconsciousness, he’d heard her telling him how much she loved him. Was she sincere?

“You’re awake,” Leticia’s voice reached him and he turned to look at her. Even though she looked quite dishevelled, to him she was still the most beautiful woman in the world. But her inheritance changed everything.

“I’ll leave the two of you to talk,” the man said, and slipped out of the room.

His words sounded ominous and Leticia saw from the look in Alistair’s eyes that he’d found out the truth about her. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He asked quietly.

“The timing never seemed right,” she said in a small voice. “Does this change anything?”

“It does. Now I can never ...” he turned away.

“Alistair,” she got on her knees and tried to take his hand but he pulled away.

Unrequited Love

Her parents were glad to see them when they returned home. Her father had sent a carriage and Larry to the old vicarage, clearly on the instructions of the man who'd saved them. They had spent three days away from home. "We were so worried about you but a very nice gentleman came and told us that you were fine. He also told us that Spencer was behind the kidnapping, and even used a maid in this house," her father said. "The girl is in jail but refuses to talk."

"This man who told you that we were fine, where is he now?"

"In the living room with your mother."

The moment Alistair saw the tall and well-built man rising to his feet, something stirred within his memory. Then their eyes met and he knew.

"Enoch?" He whispered hoarsely. "Brother?"

"Took you long enough," and the two men embraced while Leticia stood there watching them in confusion. According to what she knew, Enoch Weller, Lord Alistair's half- brother had drowned a few days after their mother's death.

"But how is it that you're alive? I thought you were dead, we all thought you had drowned."

Enoch smiled sadly. "I saw Lady Emily smothering our mother to death with a pillow. She didn't realize that I was in the bedroom and knew that I would tell father. So a few days later, she forced me out of the house and took me down to one of the cottages. Then she handed me over to some woman who brought me to London and put me in an orphanage."

"How did you get out?"

"Over the years, one of the wardens seemed to like me and said that

I reminded her of someone. I told her that my father was Admiral Keith Weller but I was the stepson to the Duke of Yarmouth. At first, they thought I was just being cheeky but as I grew older, seems that I took after my father in stature and looks. When I turned sixteen, they traced my paternal grandmother who was still alive. She took me in and took me to school after which I joined the British Army as a spy. That's how I was able to find you and Miss Leticia so quickly. I was in Yarmouth but heard that the duke had died and by listening to tattlers, I gathered that our dear stepmother wanted Ron to be the next duke. That got me worried and I watched you all through."

"Why didn't you let your presence be known?"

"Because I didn't have enough evidence to accuse Lady Emily of her crimes. So I followed you when you came to London and was in time to find out of another plot, this time involving Miss Leticia. In that time, I also visited the orphanage and even though the wardens there had been changed, was able to find the original documents that had placed me in that place. There was a letter signed by our stepmother saying that I was an orphan and as the Duchess of Yarmouth, she felt a certain responsibility and so placed me in their care. It was also signed by the vicar then, who has since died."

"You saved our lives and honour," Alistair said. "It broke my heart when you left me, Enoch."

"I didn't want to. You were so small and our mother was dead," he shook his head. "Papa was distraught and barely paying attention to what was going on around him." He looked at his brother. "How did you know that I'm really your brother and not an imposter?"

"You have mother's eyes. I may have been small but those violet eyes that turned almost blue when she would get excited were a dead giveaway. I never forgot them and you have the same eyes."

* * *

After resting briefly, Alistair found himself summoned by his host. "Your grace, I won't beat about the bush because we're both mature men. My daughter is in love with you and we've been hoping that

she would find a good man to marry her.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Leticia is in love with you and I’d like to make a proposal to you. She comes with a very large dowry and we want her to be with a man who will take care of her, love her and also protect her interests. I saw the way you were looking at her and you’re the man.”

“But I don’t have anything to offer Miss Leticia. My estate is nearly bankrupt and that’s no place to take a wife.”

“Leticia’s dowry will be more than enough to see you get things back on track again. What do you say?”

“Will you give me a day or two to think about it?”

* * *

When Alistair summoned her to the drawing room so they could discuss something important, Leticia got excited. “Susan, he’s going to propose. Papa told me that he’d spoken to Alistair and given him his blessing.”

“I hope you’re right,” Susan said. “It’s so good to see you looking so happy after the ordeal of the past few days. I always knew that something wasn’t right about that Bilha girl and Mrs. Pearl felt it too. When she came and told us that you had said we should go with her, Mrs. Pearl refused and insisted on bringing us back home herself. Or only goodness knows what might have happened to us too.”

“We’re just glad to be alive and unharmed, but Lord Spencer seems to have gone into hiding.”

“Let that serpent crawl under a rock and stay there. I just wish someone would find him and deal with him.”

“We can’t talk now, let me go and see Alistair.”

She rushed out of the room and into the drawing room, a broad smile on her face. “Oh my love, Papa told me what he asked you

and I'm so happy."

"I'm sorry but I can't marry you, Leticia," Alistair said in a quiet voice, dashing all her dreams and hopes. "I wish things were different but..." he shook his head.

As she listened to him, Leticia's heart squeezed in anguished pain. She'd made a fool of herself by blurting out her feelings for him. He didn't love her, never would. She wasn't beautiful and not all the dowry in the world could change how Alistair felt about her.

"I understand," she found herself saying, while fighting back her tears. Then she smiled, turned and walked out of her father's study.

Alistair wanted to call her back but something stuck in his throat. He'd seen the shattered look in her eyes and it pained him that he was the one who'd put it there. But she deserved more, better than him and besides, he didn't want her to think that he was interested in marrying her because of her wealth. She'd received enough of that from Spencer and didn't deserve such hurt.

* * *

Leticia watched the carriage as it drove down their short driveway. Her heart was in it, for the two people that she'd come to love so much were leaving her. She would never see Alistair and Nancy again, and the child had cried so much. But her newly found uncle knew just what to say and she'd eventually settled down for the journey ahead.

"Oh Alistair," she sobbed, lying on the bed long after they were gone. "How am I going to live without you? Why did I have to fall in love with you?"

For many days after, she was so ill and her parents began to worry. But then she suddenly woke up one morning and decided that life was too important to let it pass by. Yes, Alistair had rejected her father's proposal and left her, but it wasn't the end of the world. She still had a lot to do and started planning for an actual visit to Paris.

Her parents watched all this in silence, even her mother for once

didn't nag her about getting married. They knew that she was trying to be strong but inwardly, their child was still hurting.

To Find His Bride

Alistair nervously paced Mr. Holmes' study floor, pausing every few minutes to listen if anyone was coming. He'd had a few miserable nights of tossing and turning, worrying about what he was going to tell Leticia so she would forgive him.

He clenched his jaw, took a deep breath and then let it out again. Just then, he heard soft footsteps coming down the hallway, then they stopped outside the study door.

He didn't hesitate but hurried to the door and opened it, and looked into the face of his beloved. "Leticia," she'd never looked so beautiful at that moment and his eyes feasted hungrily on her face. "Leticia."

"Alistair, what are you doing here?" Her voice was calm though inside was a different matter. Her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest. "I never thought I'd ever see you again."

"You thought wrong, my love," he took her hands and pulled her into the study. "I didn't know what I was going to do if you kicked me out."

"What are you doing here?" She freed herself and walked to the other side of the room. "Why did you come to my father's house?"

"To ask for his permission to court you."

"I don't understand, didn't you reject me a few weeks ago?"

"Yes, and with good reason too," he approached her and she felt cornered, looking around wildly for an escape route. "I'll never do you any harm, my darling, I just want to talk. When I'm done, if you tell me to leave, then I'll go and you'll never see me again."

Leticia wanted to cry out but held herself. "Very well then."

"Come and sit down beside me so I know that you're real and not

just a figment of my imagination,” he said, taking her hand once again and leading her to the large couch in her father’s study. “My darling, it nearly killed me to have to walk away but I had to do it.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you so much.”

“What?”

“Leticia, I’ve loved you from the moment you came to my house as a governess. But so much was going on and I didn’t want to put you in harm’s way.” He shook his head. “Had I shown any interest in you, my brother would have done everything in his power to hurt you. I couldn’t let that happen and so I treated you like you didn’t matter, when all I wanted to do was hold you in my arms and never let you go.”

“But you refused my father’s proposition to marry me.”

“Because I didn’t want you to feel that I was marrying you because of your inheritance. You’re a very wealthy young woman, Leticia, and I’m sure you’ve had your fair share of suitors, including that mad man who kidnapped us. I didn’t want to be just like any of them. What I wanted was to prove to you that I love you whether or not you have money, my darling.”

“I thought you didn’t love me.”

“No, Enoch and I had to return to Great Yarmouth to confront my stepmother for the things she did.”

“What did she say?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. When she saw Enoch, she was so shocked that he was still alive that she suffered an apoplectic attack. She died twelve hours later without confessing to her evil deeds, but we found her journal.”

“Oh Alistair, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be, it was all for the best because Lady Emily would have spent the rest of her life locked up in an asylum. She was mentally unstable and it finally came to light that she’d murdered my mother so Papa could take her as his wife. Her desire was to give him a

child to become the next duke. That was why she tried to get rid of Enoch by selling him off to those people who took him to the orphanage. Luckily, she had foolishly written the letter which eventually incriminated her. It was just a matter of time before the truth was known. Nothing remains hidden forever. When grandma became suspicious about my mother's death and Enoch's disappearance, Lady Emily killed her."

"How? I thought the dowager tripped on the stairs?"

"She did, but she had help. Lady Emily tied a string across the stairs and grandma didn't see it so it tripped her, that's what she wrote in her journal."

"Oh no!"

"Papa might have suspected and that's why she poisoned him to death. If it wasn't for you, my love, I would also be dead and Ronald would be the duke."

"Wickedness never lasts forever, darling Alistair."

"What did you call me?"

"Darling?"

"Oh, Leticia. I want to hear you say that to me over and over again."

* * *

Leticia was so happy and kept praying that it wasn't just a dream. Alistair loved her and had come back to ask for her hand in marriage. As soon as she'd given him her answer, he sent a message to her father and promised to call on them the next day.

Her father had no objections and her mother was over the moon. Her daughter was getting married to a duke, and she didn't waste time but started planning for the wedding of the year.

Alistair had also told her that after the duchess's death, they had found documents showing that she'd been secretly hiding money. She'd threatened the tenants with eviction if they ever told Alistair

that they had been paying rent regularly. Instead, she'd made it seem like they owed the estate vast sums of money. All the money was in an account which she controlled. It was obvious that she would have started using it had Ron become the next duke. In that way, she could then claim that Alistair hadn't been a good manager but that her son had saved the duchy.

The Thurmond family wasn't wealthy, but there was money to live on comfortably for a while until things got better. Once Alistair had put his affairs in order, he felt worthy to be her husband and so had returned for her.

The large ruby on her finger was his mother's ring, yet another priceless item that Lady Emily had stolen and hidden in her room. She was finally going to be Alistair's wife!

End of the Wicked

A sharp crack sounded from right outside the carriage and Leticia gave a little scream. Her father froze and the expression on his face filled her heart with dread.

“Highway men,” Fenton’s voice was strong in spite of the initial shock. “The scum of the earth!”

“Papa, what are we going to do?”

“Child, sit still. At least your mother is already gone ahead or she would be screaming her head off,” he tried to make light of their current plight and she giggled. It was true; her mother could be dramatic at times. “Make sure you don’t get your wedding gown soiled, or Alistair will have my hide.” He reached under the seat and pulled out two revolvers. “I never go anywhere without these and they’re loaded too,” he winked and grinned at her and she suddenly felt calm. Now she knew why she loved Alistair so much, he reminded her of her father. Very calm and strong in the face of trouble. They would be alright, she just knew it. “Those highwaymen will rue the day they dared try to stop Fenton Holmes from getting his daughter to church to be married,” and saying this, he slid open the carriage window, put his face out and then pulled it back in again.

“Lay very low, Leticia,” he said in a soft voice. “Get down on your knees.” She didn’t think twice but fell to her knees and covered her face, just as she heard horses riding up to the carriage. Two shots rang out and then there was a double thud, groans and finally silence. “Got them,” Fenton said, but even then, he didn’t immediately open the door. Two more shots rang out and then someone called out.

“Mr. Holmes are you alright?” It was Larry, and he helped his daughter back to her seat.

“Larry, we’re alright. What about you?”

“Gary’s hand is hurt but you got them, sir. I had to make sure they were posing no further threat, sir,” the footman called out. That’s when Edward finally opened the door and stepped out.

“Who are they?”

“Their faces are covered but this one is still alive. I didn’t want to finish him off because I knew you would want to question him.”

“You did good. Now, get the masks off their faces.”

“Upon my word!” Larry exclaimed loudly and Leticia moved to the window to see what had him so rattled. “Tis Lord Spencer and his worthless servant, sir.”

And So It Was...

Alistair held Leticia's hand as they stood side by side at his parents' and grandmother's graves.

"Pa, Ma, Granny," Alistair said in his deep voice. "I'd like you to know that two days ago, I married Leticia Holmes, the woman I love with my whole heart. I 'm sorry you went too soon by the hand of that wicked woman, and never got to meet Leticia." His voice broke and he felt Leticia squeeze his hand gently.

"Lord and Ladies Thurmond, I promise to take good care of Alistair for all of you," she whispered.

Her soft words made his heart warm and he turned to look at her. "I love you so much, Leticia," and he bent his head to softly brush his lips against hers.

"Susan and Enoch must be wondering where we are," she touched his cheek. "You'll never be alone again, Alistair. You have me and now your brother has returned home also."

"That's my blessing," he said as he turned her homewards. "Are you happy, my darling?"

"So much that it feels like a dream. And now my best friend is marrying your brother."

"Enoch is almost as blessed as I am," Alistair said. "You've been my angel and I'll love you with my dying breath, and even after that, I'll still be loving you."

"Oh Alistair, you say such nice things."

"And mean all that I say. Now, we need to join the other guests and show our support for our loved ones."

"Indeed."

Alistair whirled Leticia around the dance floor and she felt like a princess in her new gown that was similar to Susan's because she'd been her best friend's maid of honour. This was just perfect!

"Just see how happy Enoch and Susan are," Alistair whispered in Leticia's ear.

She turned to look at the woman who'd been her handmaid for nearly seven years, whose eyes were glowing with love as she danced in the arms of the tall, muscular, handsome man. Enoch looked down at Susan like she was the most important person in the world to him.

This was the first wedding to be held on the estate in a very long time and Alistair had spared no expense. Now that a good part of his fortunes had been restored, he could afford to be generous to his mother's eldest son. Happy days were here!

"A penny for your thoughts, my darling?" His arms tightened around Leticia.

"I was just thinking that I'm the luckiest woman in the world," she said. "Lord Alistair Thurmond, you've made me so happy and I love you so much."

Alistair's response was to kiss her gently, forgetting all those who were around them. They seemed to be the only two existing at that moment. He raised his head and looked deep into her eyes.

"I love you too, my beautiful duchess."

And in that moment, Leticia knew that she had fulfilled her grandmother's dying wish. She had found true love at last.

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* * *

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